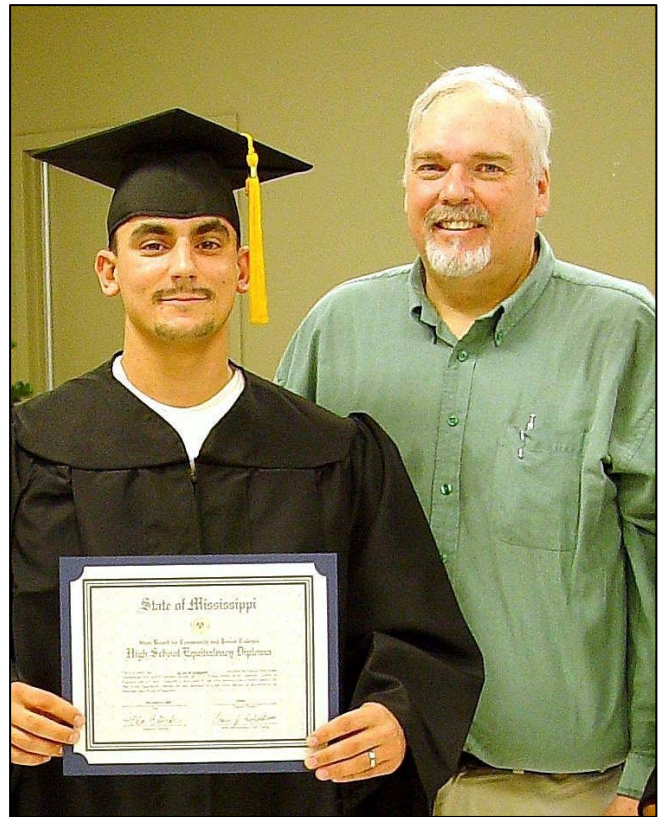


WAYNE EMISON: "TOMORROW BELONGS TO US"

Editor's note: GED graduate Wayne Emison received a standing ovation for this speech to classmates and guests, delivered June 3, 2010, during commencement exercises for students who earned high school equivalency diplomas at East Mississippi Community College. He is pictured at a reception with GED instructor James Bearden.



"I would like to welcome our guests, friends and family, and all my fellow graduates. To the dedicated faculty at East Mississippi Community College, I would like to say "thank you" on behalf of myself and the graduating class.

"Life is a complex series of journeys controlled by the choices we make – whether good or bad. A lot of us are here tonight because of bad choices. Some are here because life threw them a bad curve. But, by being here tonight, we celebrate and share what is a major life accomplishment for each of us. Whatever the cause that put us off the track in life, we have overcome. From this point on, we are in charge of our own destiny.

"Graduates, look to your left and right. The person sitting next to you has worked extremely hard to be here tonight, to walk across this stage and say, "I've graduated." Share with them the pride and joy each of us rightly earned. Outside this building is the world that we all allowed earlier to control our lives. Beginning right now, we will re-take control of our lives and we will make this world what it needs to be for us.

"I have made some bad choices in my life that put me on a journey I didn't want to make. I thought I was choosing the easy path, but life isn't supposed to be easy. The path I took cost me ... and dearly. It cost me the chance to walk across a stage like this years ago when I could have. It cost me jobs that I enjoyed, and that earned me a good salary. Most recently, and worst of all, it cost me a year with my family, my children and the woman I love dearly.

"I can't go back and get any of that back. But I am lucky. East Mississippi Community College and Mr. James Bearden helped me attain my GED. The Department of Corrections helped me understand, and realize, where I did not want to be. Through all that I put myself, and them, through, my family helped me by being there, supporting and loving me, and waiting for me.

"I don't know each of your stories. I have no way of knowing what obstacles you had to overcome to get here. What I do know is this: You're here. You've made it this far. And if you and I can achieve this, we can achieve any goal we set for ourselves. At times, we may feel overwhelmed, unable to carry on. Those who loved and supported us in the quest to get here will be there for us then, too.

"Many of us will continue our education, here at EMCC or at another institution. Some of us will finally get the job or promotion that has eluded us. All of us will, from this night on, have the pride and knowledge of what we have achieved.

"If we compare our lives to a novel, we have just ended a chapter. Tomorrow begins a new chapter, a blank page on which to write our story. May each of us write many new chapters in our book, with each one better than the one before.

"Once again, thank you to the faculty members who helped us, worked with us and – most of all – believed in us and guided us here tonight. Thank you to our family and friends who came here to support us tonight. Congratulations to each of you sitting here tonight. You have achieved ... tomorrow belongs to us."

Wayne Emison
June 3, 2010