Thank you.

It is my distinct pleasure to join you on this special occasion to help recognize the accomplishment of the young men and women of Coffee County High School. This is an important evening because we are honoring people who will become future leaders. I congratulate all of you on your accomplishments.

Before me stands one of the Olympic torches that is now being carried, hand to hand, across the nation to Georgia. The Olympic torch was designed by two faculty members at Georgia Tech, and this makes this symbolic cross-country trip all the more meaningful to us at Georgia Tech. The torch stands for the spirit of Olympic competition, and its journey through America tells the story of a country made up of many parts that work together to make a nation. What is amazing is that the end of this journey is going to be right here in Georgia, our home state. The world is coming to visit us. What I would like to talk to you about tonight is how your own journey, and in a sense my journey, connects to this one.

Some time back, I was a student here in Coffee County. In fact, this was so far back, there was no Coffee County High School, but rather Douglas City High. While I was a student here my teachers did their level best to educate me, and although I was interested in far too many other things, like hunting, fishing and goofing off, they actually succeeded. I like to return under these circumstances to demonstrate to my old teachers that the boy to whom they had to administer corporeal punishment from time to time, turned out half decent.
My roots in South Georgia go back many generations. My grandmother and grandfather on both my mother’s and father’s sides were farmers in and around Douglas and Hazelhurst. My father grew up at a time when if you didn’t stay on the farm, you left to find work somewhere else. My father was never able to go to college, and ultimately earned a certification from the International Correspondence School in refrigeration engineering while working on banana boats that sailed between New Orleans and South and Central America. My mother was able to go to one year at South Georgia College, and then had to go to work. She and dad married in 1926 and eventually moved back to begin life in Douglas, founding an ice and coal plant. Dad was the mayor of Douglas and ran on a platform that he would help build the hospital that now stands on the west side of town.

My mother and father were people who knew what the word family values really meant. They gave these values to their children by example. Even though they could not go to college, they believed in the value of education and they sent each of their three children, my older sister, Phyllis and my older brother, Ronnie, and myself to college. I was lucky enough to get to go to Georgia Tech and get a degree in civil engineering. Eventually, I went on to get a Ph.D. partly based on my parents’ inspiration.

I am thankful for what my parents did to allow me to receive a first-rate education that has helped me in all I have done. In recognition of this, I am pleased to make the first public announcement that I have established an endowed scholarship at Georgia Tech, the Bessie and Daniel Gaskin Clough Scholarship, in honor of my parents. This scholarship will have as its first priority, support of a student from Coffee County who wishes to go to Georgia Tech.
Tonight, I am proud to make the first award from this scholarship, $2000, to Christopher Giddens. Christopher, would you please stand so you can be recognized.

Today, we have only six students from Coffee County at Georgia Tech. More of you should be going to Tech - Georgia Tech is one of only 15 public universities to be ranked by US News and World Report within their top fifty institutions in the nation. At Georgia Tech, and I am not simply tooting our own horn, you can get one of the best educations in the world. What is amazing, with Governor Miller’s Hope scholarship program, you can go to Tech for absolutely minimum cost.

Christopher is coming to Georgia Tech at a time of historical moment. In less that a month and a half the security fences surrounding our campus are locked down and we become the Village for the 1996 Centennial Olympic Games. The torch will arrive on our campus from its cross country trip. The, shortly after the Olympic Games are over, we again play host again, this time to the Paralympic Games. The Paralympic Games are similar to the Olympics, but only physically disabled athletes compete.

All told, there has been an investment of about one-quarter of a billion dollars in our campus facilities so we can host the Olympic and Paralympic Games for about four weeks total. That is about $1 million invested per day of athletic competition. The eyes of the world are already on our campus, with television crews filming and visitors passing through in buses. At Georgia Tech we feel like we have followed the advice of John D. Rockefeller for success, “rise early, work late, strike oil.” And what is being invested in Georgia Tech is only small change in terms of what else is being spent in and around Atlanta for the Games. The value of the Olympics for Georgia will last long after the Games.
From the larger perspective, it is hard to understand how so much money and attention could be spent on an athletic competition in which the athletes ostensibly compete only for medals. In addition to the enormous investment that is put into Olympic facilities, the athletes themselves make a substantial commitment. After his Olympic experience, the great track athlete Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals, said that he trained ten years to run a ten second race. Then it was over. In a related way, you have devoted yourselves for twelve years to training of your minds. By your presence here tonight, you have shown your ability to be a winner. Of course, you have even further to travel to complete the process of becoming prepared for life’s competition. Fortunately, all of your training will not be used up in a ten second race. Yours is a very long distance run. You must steadily work your way toward success without jumping for the quick and easy buck. There is an old, and appropriate saying, "A man who makes a big splash may be a man who has gone overboard."

We don’t know exactly what the future will be like. The old baseball catcher Yogi Berra, was at least accurate when he said “most of your future is ahead of you.” But there is one thing we do know and that is, our country is going to need all you can give. I grew up in the 1950’s and 60’s when our nation had it all. Our competitors were either crushed or exhausted from the effects of World War II. You are coming of age in a world where there is stiff global competition in every nook and cranny of our country, and where we have to learn new ways to maintain a viable economy without destroying our fragile planet. The world is not just coming to Georgia for the Olympics, but to stay.
As you prepare for the future, you should know that growing up in a place like Coffee County gives you an advantage, and I can speak from experience.

My upbringing in Douglas was never far from my mind as I went to Georgia Tech, then onto compete with the best students from around the world at U.C. Berkeley. After that I found my education was tempered by common sense that most others did not have. It has carried me around the world in a range of engineering and academic positions. My journey is one which has brought me back to my native state. But, in the quiet moments in far away places I have worked in, I often found solace in remembrances of my birthplace. The wind musically whistling though the long leaf pines, boyhood adventures in the woods and swamps, lazy summer days walking barefoot in plowed fields, and friends and family who were there when you needed them.

For a while when you go out into the world, you will find those who seem sophisticated and worldly to have an advantage on you. But because you should be in it for the long run, growing up in Douglas Georgia will be your edge as you compete in the game of life, just as growing up in Plains helped Jimmy Carter become President of the United States. You can bet on it. In the metaphor of the Olympics, we are passing the torch to you. Now your turn is coming to insure that the torch continues to burn brightly for your native Georgia and your country.