REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
5th Grade Graduation, Centennial Place Elementary, June 8, 2004

Congratulations “graduates” on your achievement, all 86 of you.

This is my second graduation of the spring. A month ago I served as host for Georgia Tech’s graduation – 2,500 very smart and talented young men and women graduated. I got to shake hands with all 2,500 of them – ouch! But it was still fun.

All of those Tech grads had a lot in common with you. Like you, they had some of the best test scores in the state of Georgia. Like you, they learned how to use computers and studied math and science. Like you, they had a lot of support from their families and friends. And like you, they have a great future ahead of them.

Centennial Place Elementary School is special to Georgia Tech. More than a few of you have parents or relatives who work at Tech or are students or alumni. Many of you have interacted with Tech students who serve as tutors or in support roles for the school. Many of you have participated in our extracurricular K-12 programs. And I hope many of you will decide later on when you are older to become Georgia Tech students.

This is a joyous celebration of success, but I want to talk a little about failure, beginning with my own experience. I have never lost a golf tournament. I have never had a poem rejected for publication in a literary magazine. I have never lost an election for political office. I have never won a beauty contest. Now, I enjoy golf and poetry, and politics and beauty contest are interesting to me, so my track record sounds pretty good. But actually, what all of these have in common is that I have never tried to do any of them.

So what does this mean? Well, the main choice we make in life is to choose what level we will try to achieve. Another way of saying this is ask what is the level where we are willing to risk failure?

Only those who are willing to try run risk of failure. Last week I saw a man who had not failed at anything in a thousand years. He was a mummy in the Michael Carlos Museum over at Emory University. So, the only way we will never fail is to be satisfied with saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing. Too many people limit their successes because they never risk any great commitments, never make any hard promises, never take on any challenging tasks.

We need to appreciate that failure is a great teacher. The way we learned to walk, read, add, use computer, play musical instrument, play a sport – try, fail, and try again. Failure can teach us why something doesn’t work; what to change to make it better. It might even teach us that we quit too soon.

But to fail is not to be defeated. Defeat only comes if you don’t get back up and try again. Let me give you some good examples. Babe Ruth is famous for hitting home runs in baseball. But to hit
lots of homeruns, he had to swing the bat a lot. So he also struck out a record number of times. But we don’t remember that; we remember his success.

Right here at Georgia Tech this past year, our men’s basketball team lost three star players before the season started. All the experts said our team would finish last in our conference. But our coach, Paul Hewitt never doubted they could win, and he and our players said, “We will not give up even though three players are gone.” They went on to win 30 games; they snapped Duke’s 41-game home winning streak; and they won their way into the national championship game, because they would not give up, even though others never gave them a chance.

Marian Anderson was one of America’s best-loved concert and opera singers. But early in her career, she was denied admission to music school despite her obvious talent, because she was African American. She had to start her career in Europe, because African Americans were not permitted in American concert halls and opera houses in those days. But she persisted. She finally got a helping hand from First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who organized out-door concert for her in front of the Lincoln Memorial when a Washington D.C. concert hall would not let her sing. Seventy-five thousand people came. Her performance was so magnificent, no one could deny her tremendous talent, and she was asked to sing at Metropolitan Opera of New York.

We will elect a President in November. Presidents are usually governors or U.S. Senators, but one of our most famous Presidents was never a Governor or a Senator. He ran for the U.S. Senate two times, and lost both times. He wasn’t even the first choice from his political party to run for President. He was chosen only after the first choice had fallen through. His name? Abraham Lincoln.

Another famous person in history was Winston Churchill. We have been seeing news and special shows remembering World War II the past few days as President Bush headed to Europe for 60th anniversary of D-Day. Churchill was prime minister of Great Britain during the war, and his rousing speeches rallied his people. He had worked hard to overcome a stuttering handicap and became known as one of the world’s great orators. As a boy, he attended the Harrow School in England, where he was not a popular student. One teacher wrote on his report card, “A conspicuous lack of success.” After he became a famous world leader, Harrow invited him back as the graduation speaker. He gave the shortest commencement speech on record. He said: “Never give up! Never give up! Never, never, never give up!”

Today we all join in celebrating your success, but tomorrow, next week, or next year – in fact, many times in your life – you will experience failure. When that happens, remember to treat your failures as practice shots. Remember – failure only becomes defeat when you do not get back up and try again. Keep up the good work, and I hope to see may of you right back here on Georgia Tech’s campus as students in a few years!