

The University of Toledo Fall Commencement  
Saturday, December 20, 2014  
10 a.m. Ceremony Speaker

## **Mike Thaman**

### *Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer*

Mike Thaman is the Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer of Owens Corning, a world leader in building materials and composite systems.



Mr. Thaman was named a member of the Board of Directors in January of 2002 and elected Chairman later that year. He was appointed Senior Vice President and Chief Financial Officer in April of 2000.

Since joining the company in 1992, Mr. Thaman has held positions in manufacturing, corporate development and international business. He was named Vice President and President of Owens Corning's Exterior Systems Business in 1999. In 1997, he became Vice President and President of the company's Engineered Pipe Systems business headquartered in Brussels, Belgium.

Prior to joining Owens Corning, Mr. Thaman spent six years as a strategy consultant at Mercer Management Consulting, where he was a Vice President in the New York office.

Mr. Thaman earned a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering and computer science from Princeton University.

He is a member of the Board of Directors of Kohler Co. Mr. Thaman serves on the Executive Committee and the Policy Advisory Board of the Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies. In addition, he is Co-Chair of the Ohio Business Roundtable Executive Committee, serves on the Business Roundtable, where he chaired the Energy Efficiency Task Force, and is an Executive Committee member of the Toledo Symphony.

## ***Mike Thaman – UT Commencement Address for Dec 20, 2014***

Good morning. Joe Zerbey and the Trustees of the University, and President Naganathan and your Senior Leadership, thank you for the invitation to join you on this special occasion.

And to the fall 2014 graduating class and your families ... Congratulations.

As Board Chair Joe Zerbey mentioned ... I'm a CEO, which is probably why I was invited to speak to you.

But I'm also a dad, which is why I agreed to come.

I have 8 kids. And I think about what I'd want them to know as they go out into the world.

The thing is, they don't always listen to me. I'm just dad. What do I know? But *you* -- well, frankly, you're stuck. You have to sit through this if you want to walk up and get that diploma in a few minutes.

So bear with me here, and maybe a few of the things I've learned in my life can be of some value. (If not, it'll be over soon enough.)

I graduated college in 1986, which is more than five years before most of you were born.

The world has changed dramatically in that time.

At first, I wondered what I could say that's relevant to students today.

We've seen lots of technology change. We've seen new products and different politics and business models.

But people ... as a whole, we tend to grapple with many of the same big questions.

Especially people sitting where you are right now.

I know when I sat where you are, I was thinking:

What's next for me?

How will I pay the bills?

Will I get my dream job?

Will I be happy?

*Will my life be everything I hoped it would be?*

As I sat where you are, *I had no idea.*

And what I know now is, neither does anyone else.

Because there is no magic formula. No foolproof plan. No syllabus for life. What I *can* do is offer some thoughts on how to avoid things that might get in your way ... things I call “Head Fakes.”

In sports, a head-fake is when an opponent tries to mislead you by faking one way with their head and then moving their body in another direction.

In life, there are certain norms and expectations that can act as head-fakes: Ideas that can trip you, trap you, or just get in your way.

The information age has made them more persuasive and pervasive than ever. We’re inundated with messages about what we’re “supposed” to do to be happy, to be successful, or to make a difference. They aren’t deliberately misleading — just not as ironclad as they might seem. And that’s the trick.

As with any head-fake, if you fall for it, you’re probably focused on the wrong thing. Following can undermine your confidence and fool you into thinking, living, and acting smaller than you are.

*I want you to live large—push your limits. See what you can achieve.*

And avoiding these head-fakes can help ...

### **Head-Fake #1: You have to have a "Grand Plan."**

It was my first week as a college freshman. I was a midwest kid, out east for the first time. There were orientation parties all over campus. *My agenda?* Make some friends, have some fun.

Then I started getting approached by guys who were running for freshman class president. One of them had his entire career path laid out—from president of the freshman class, to president of the United States. My goal was to graduate and get a job. Any job.

I started to get a little intimidated. Maybe I needed a better plan; maybe I needed a bigger goal; maybe I needed stronger direction. It was the first week of school and I already felt like I was falling behind.

In life, you will meet people who seem to have it all figured out.

That's the kind of head-fake that can erode your confidence — if you let it. Don't.

It's nice to have a vision, but it's no guarantee. And too often the single-minded pursuit of a goal can blind us to other opportunities. Don't let some notion of a goal get in the way of enjoying the journey. Few career paths are a straight line.

I didn't set out to be a CEO, or a father of 8, for that matter. I *did* intend to learn everything that I could from every experience I had. And that has opened doors I never could have imagined.

As for my classmate, I don't know where that guy is today, but it's not the Oval office. (Who knows, maybe he found a better job along the way.)

My advice – relax. If you learn something every day and make yourself valuable to others, that's enough of a plan for now.

## **Head-Fake #2: A good way to track your progress is to compare yourself to others**

We all know this one. And we fall for it anyway. I think it's even harder today. Social media makes it feel like the world is full of people who are richer, better looking, and luckier than you are. The bad news is ... it's true. No matter who you are, somebody will always have more. Somebody will always be better at something. Have a life that seems more exciting than yours. So...get over it. Why waste any more of your own life comparing yourself to others? Why sit by and *watch* someone else's life instead of *living* your own?

The good news is, once you stop trying so hard to be someone else, you get a lot better at being yourself.

When my wife and I were in our late 20's, we were living in Manhattan. We had two incomes, an apartment on the Upper East Side, and no kids. Some would consider that "living the dream."

But it wasn't *our* dream. We decided to leave our jobs in New York and move to Toledo.

Most of our friends couldn't even locate Toledo on a map, much less understand why we would want to move here to pursue our dreams.

And that's okay. We weren't doing it to impress anyone. We were doing it because it made sense for us.

If we had defined our dream based on someone else's notion of success, or of what was cool or appropriate, we would have ended up living an entirely different life, and not our own.

My advice – don't be afraid to swim against the current as long as *you* believe you are headed in the right direction.

### **Head-Fake #3: Being successful means avoiding failure.**

If you're in the game, you will make mistakes. Probably many.

Good for you. It's how you learn.

And ... the only way to learn fast is to put yourself in positions where total and complete failure is a distinct possibility.

In the late '90s, I was offered an "opportunity" that looked like this:

My wife and I, along with our 2-year-old and 6-month-old children, would move to Belgium. I would lead a business unit that was losing money hand over fist, had technology that wasn't working as designed, and had already churned through three presidents in the past 24 months.

I had absolutely no reason to believe I'd be successful, and every reason to be concerned that we might end up very far from home with a young family and no jobs.

We said, "Sounds like an adventure, let's go!"

It wasn't easy. There was lots of travel, long hours, and no meaningful improvement in the first 12 months. There were many times I thought, "This is going to end badly," and wondered what we had gotten ourselves into.

But, I had a great team, and we stuck with it. We used the fear of failure as motivation — rather than allowing it to scare us away. We dug in, and turned things around in the second year.

And in the process, I acquired skills and experience that have been invaluable in my subsequent jobs.

Not only that, my family was able to create some of our fondest life memories.

My advice – not all opportunities come wrapped in shiny paper.

Some of the best ones come plastered with a warning that says "Beware – Potential Danger Ahead."

**My 4<sup>th</sup> and Final Head Fake: Where you work is more important that what you do.**

I talk to students all the time who say they want to make a difference. They think they have to go work at GreenPeace.

People underestimate the change they can make right where they stand. Why do we think we have to be somewhere else (or be someone else) to make a difference?

I work with people who are finding ways to make windmill blades longer and lighter ... helping to make low-cost wind power a reality in the places that need it most. They may not look like Bono, but they are changing the world. I work with people who are breaking new ground in the way we design and build homes ... helping to make a gentler energy footprint on the earth for the next 80 years. They may not dress like Steve Jobs, but they are changing the world.

My advice – if you want to change the world, start wherever you are. If you set out with honest intentions and you follow through ... you will make a difference. I know because I see it happen all the time.

So if you're sitting there today, (or even in the months and years to come) and you're worried because you think that you need to have a plan; that you might not measure up; that you can't afford to risk failure; or that you can't make a difference;

Think again.

Don't be fooled.

Put your focus back where it matters: keep learning, stop comparing, risk failing and start wherever you are.

And I know you'll do great things.

Congratulations.