



## Commencement Speech by Brandon Brooks-Patton, TRUE ACCESS Fellow, NKU '25

Approximately 15 years ago, I arrived at Northern Kentucky University with little more than the clothes on my back, a GED, and the determined hope of a first-generation college student from rural Kentucky. I had just emerged from a childhood marked by domestic violence and repeated bouts of homelessness, but I held tightly to one belief—that education could change my life.

And for a little while, the change that I strived for felt within reach. However, not long after I began attending, life reminded me just how fragile circumstances can be. I was cast back into homelessness and had to leave school behind. I was *crushed*. I carried with me a growing sense of inadequacy and regret, and I began to wonder if higher education was something meant for *people like me*.

For years after, I only focused on survival. And when you're surviving, dreaming becomes a luxury you can't afford.

Later in life, my wife and I welcomed our first child into the world. It was a moment where my demeanor completely changed. Pursuit of higher education wasn't about chasing dreams anymore—it was about building something worthy for him to believe in. I wanted my son to grow up knowing that circumstances do not define who we are. I wanted to show him resilience, perseverance, and love can defy even the harshest odds—turning pain into purpose, struggle into strength, and survival into success.

Returning to NKU, I didn't just return to pursue a degree—I returned to reclaim a sense of possibility. And what I found this time was more than a university. I found a community. I found professors who saw potential when all I felt was doubt. I found mentors who believed in me when I didn't know how to believe in myself.

Recently, Dr. Brittany Smith introduced me for an award, saying many kind words. But at one point, she said that sometimes, all she felt like she had to say was, "Keep going." Just two words. But for students navigating uncertainty and self-doubt, those words mean everything. I received support from multiple faculty members along the way, reminding me I was never alone.

In times like today, when there is volatility in the STEM community and when students from disadvantaged backgrounds continue to face barriers that some may never have to think about, institutions like NKU have never mattered more. This university has proven that when you invest in people—not just their grades or GPAs, but their stories, their struggles, their potential—you don't just change lives. You change generations. But that kind of transformation doesn't happen by accident. It happens through bold, deliberate commitment. So NKU, I urge you to keep being that place. Double down on it. Be relentless in your support of vulnerable students. Because when you create space for the most underestimated among us—you don't just open doors. You build new ones entirely.

Because of the immense support I've received, I'm proud to say that I've been able to publish my work in multiple scientific journals, complete a summer research internship at Harvard University, and was selected for admission to begin doctoral studies through the Interdepartmental Neuroscience Program at Yale University. (Maybe you've heard of it?)

Yet, when I sat in those graduate school interviews at Yale, surrounded by some of the most accomplished scholars from the most prestigious institutions in the world, it was NKU that I spoke about with the most pride. Because *this* is where my foundation was laid. *This* is where I found my voice.

To my wife and children: Your patience, your love, and your support carried me through the hardest days. This degree might have my name on it, but your fingerprints are all over it. You are my reason for everything; no words can truly capture how much I love you.

And to everyone graduating today: We have finally made it.

This day isn't just about earning a degree—it's about honoring every step it took to reach this moment. Each of us has faced our own set of challenges. No matter how winding the path, how heavy the doubt, or how many times you stumbled—you're here. And that matters. It matters because you kept showing up every day. This is the power of resilience.

As we step into the next chapters of our lives, hold onto this moment. Let it remind you of what you're capable of—not just when life goes smoothly, but especially when it doesn't. The world doesn't need perfection. It needs people who love deeply, fight bravely, and rise after every fall—not just for themselves, but for those around them. Aspire to be *that* kind of person. Because you never know who's watching, who you're inspiring, or what doors you're opening—just by staying true to your path.

And for anyone who may not be graduating yet, that feels like they might not belong in spaces like these—let me assure you. I once doubted I could ever stand where I am right now. But today, it's me standing here. Tomorrow, that person could be you. "Keep going."

Congratulations to the Class of 2025. This is your moment. Embrace it. Never let go of the passion and purpose that brought you to this day.