COMMON GROUND

Thank you, thank you very much. President Baele, Rector Pols, Mayor Aboutaleb, EUR Faculty and Staff, and fellow students, I am proud and humbled to be here today.

Three years ago I was sitting somewhere in this aula, and like many of you today, I was nervous. It was my first day of university. And I remember I had a thousand things on my mind that day, from finding a roommate to figuring out where my classes took place. In fact, I wanted to get out of this ceremony as soon as possible. I’m assuming you feel the same, so I will keep this short.

CALL TO ADVENTURE

I was asked to be here today to talk about my work in Rotterdam, where I helped build a nonprofit school on a mission to give people the chance to start a new life; but before that, for my last time as a student here at Erasmus University, I want to tell you a story.

My father is a role-model to me. He was born in a small village at the base of the Carpathian Mountains, in the heart of Romania, at a time when the country was run by a communist dictator. He grew up with nothing, having to work the land, together with his brothers and sisters, which was the only way to put food on the table for the family. He went from there to be the first person in his village to go to college, and later to obtain a Ph.D. in what has always been his true passion - mathematics. His journey, from the most basic level of human existence to becoming a successful researcher and accomplishing his dream is a vivid reminder to me that nothing is impossible.

My father was given the chance to try thanks to the kindness of others, and he shared with me a lesson that I will always remember: no one makes it through life alone.

CONTRAST [PULP]

The world my father was born in was, in some ways, fundamentally different than the world we live in today. Today we live in a world where I can pull out of my pocket a computer that is 1000x faster than the one used to put the first people on the moon.

[PULLS UP COMPUTER FROM POCKET]

Yet, in many ways, we are still facing old challenges. The UN Refugee Agency reported that there are more refugees in the world today than during the Second World War. In the world today, there are more refugees than during the Second World War.

(CONTINUED)
In the past two years, more than 1.5 million newcomers reached our shores here in Europe. These people want to start a new life on a continent that has a shortage of almost one million people in the technology industry. An industry notorious for its lack of diversity.

At Erasmus University I learned that it is our responsibility to society to make a difference. I believe that. I believe that despite all of our challenges, many as they may seem, we should fight for a community that gives more people, just like my father, the chance to try to better the world.

So together with a good friend and fellow student, Fredrick Rustler, and an incredible team, we imagined a new type of school. A transformative experience built from first principles that would empower refugees, people from low-income backgrounds, and underrepresented minorities to start a new life through a career in the technology industry.

Imagine a school with no teachers, where engineers’ from the world’s biggest technology companies, give master classes and are your mentors.

A school that has no textbooks, where you learn by doing, by working together with NGOs to build solutions to real-world problems, and by joining tech companies while still studying.

In a one-year digital curriculum inspired by reality: where students need to give public talks, learn by teaching others, and teamwork is a requirement to succeed.

And finally, a school that is tuition-free, with a nonprofit business model based on the success of the students.

At Restart Network we have built this school here in the Rotterdam - we call it ONE, the world’s first crowdsourced tech school. Today it is successful thanks to this simple belief: that as a community, we all share a duty to building people together.

Yet, I know what some of you might be thinking right now: what is this guy talking about? Hasn’t he seen the news, there’s a war in the Middle East, terrorist attacks in Europe, we are in the middle of a huge Climate Crisis, and we live in a world where the President of the most powerful nation seems to deny that very fact. Where’s the kindness in this world?
To that I say: may be so, but we should still try, even if odds seem to be against us. And I believe one thing, that there is no better place to start than here, in Rotterdam.

[Ending 1]

I’ll show you why that is the case.

I will ask a question to all of you here, over a thousand of you, people from all corners of this planet, students, academics, state ambassadors, and community leaders. And I ask that you answer this truthfully.

if you believe that in this community diversity is our strength, please STAND UP

if you believe that our differences make us stronger, please STAND UP

and if you believe that it is our duty to help those who once felt weak, become powerful, please STAND UP

[PEOPLE STAND UP]

Look around you. This is why I am proud and humbled to be part of this community and to be one of you.

Thank you.