President Toro’s introduction of Mickey Perez:

I am very pleased to introduce you to someone who knows all too well about resiliency and overcoming barriers.

Michele Perez is an industrial manager at jet engine manufacturer Pratt & Whitney. When I tell you that she has boundless enthusiasm for all things aviation and aerospace, that is an understatement.

On her own time, she makes it a point to attend air shows, aviation, and STEM events around the country, where she seeks out young people to share knowledge about career paths and mentorship opportunities.

To that end, in 2020 she founded the non-profit, Super Jet Brunette — the name is a nod to one of her defining attributes.

Her mission — foster and inspire the next generation of “TEAAMS” professionals – T-E-A-A-M-S. That is Mickey’s acronym to represent the fields of technology, engineering, aviation, aerospace, manufacturing, and science.

Her own life’s trajectory is nothing short of inspirational.

As a young teenager, she was homeless and pregnant and had to drop out of high school. It was a lot to handle, but she did not let that stop her. She went on to earn a G-E-D, and several years later, an associate degree from the College of Staten Island.

The next stop on her journey was Central and in short order, she proved that she was a force to be reckoned with, earning an impressive number of honors and scholarships.

She reinvigorated the campus chapter of the Association of Technology Management and Applied Engineering and became the first female intern of the Quality Scholarship Program partnership between Central and Pratt & Whitney.

To this day, she continues to share her enthusiasm and expertise with CCSU and our students as a member of the Manufacturing & Technology Management Industrial Advisory Board.

Never forgetting what it is like to be homeless, Mickey set a personal goal to make a difference in someone’s life every day. Today, you are that someone.

I present CCSU alumna, Mickey Perez.

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Mickey Perez’ speech begins here:

Today I’m going to call you all my “padawans.”

I call my mentees “padawans”

The most famous Jedi and Padawan were Yoda & Luke Skywalker

Yoda said to Luke, “Pass on what you have learned. Strength, mastery ... but weakness, folly, failure also. ... The greatest teacher, failure is.”
That’s what I’m here to do today. Pass on some strength and mastery, but plenty of weakness, folly, and failure, too.

Today’s performance wasn’t always part of my life plan. As a teenager, I was homeless living on the streets of Brooklyn.

Using napkins from Dunkin Donuts to fill the holes in my shoes.

In Bay Ridge, I would sleep on the park benches of Shore Road under the light of the Verrazano - Narrows Bridge. To this day I’ll never forget the stench of the Narrows and white noise of the highway only yards away.

I forgot to mention I wasn’t just homeless. I was pregnant, too.

I’d try and stay awake to see the lights go out on the bridge, that’s when I learned to sleep with one eye open.

Unbathed and exhausted, I’d show up to school, until one dreadful night when I was bullied by a crew of drunken boys who ripped up my school books and threw the pages all over the park.

In the winter, I learned if stood outside apartment buildings long enough, someone would eventually open the door, and I could get inside to warm up.

One rainy night I was so cold and hungry, I remember a couple arriving at their apartment. I needed to stop crying long enough, so I could ask them for a towel or a blanket, but I couldn’t, and they walked right past me.

That night I made a vow to myself and to God that I’d never walk past someone in distress. If I ever made it out of there, I’d do my best to change one life for the better each year.

I can’t really say that I grew up, but as you can see, I made it to being an adult. An adult who tries to be of service to others.

When I was 20, I studied to be a Certified Nurse’s Aide. My first and only role as a CNA was at a state-run nursing home caring for senior citizens who needed full-time care. That place was a dump.

Most of these folks didn’t have a single visitor in the six months I was there. So, I’d stay after work, and “visit” them. They’d tell shocking stories. About what it was like during the Holocaust and the Great Depression.

One thing stuck with me. In unison, they all echoed the same thing: I wish I’d done this, I wish I’d said that. I wish I’d not spent so much of my time holding a grudge. I wish I’d saved more money, so I wouldn’t have to be in this dump!

NEVER end up with those kinds of regrets. That was the lesson I took away from being there.

I tell myself every day to “Dream as if I’ll live forever, and to live as if I will die tomorrow.”

I didn’t write that, BTW. That was James Dean.
If people tell me I’m outspoken or too driven, I think back to what those folks told me on their death beds. Sometimes I feel like I live my life to the fullest for them — for those beautiful people who died alone with regrets.

For that reason, I work hard, I play hard, but I also I love hard.

This is who I am, love me or leave me.

Just please don’t try to stop me because I have so much to do in this life before I’m in that bed speaking to MY nurse about MY regrets.

I have some words of wisdom for you today, my padawans.

When you’re young, you divide experiences into good and bad ones. But over time, it’s harder to distinguish between the two.

All plans are a mixture of successes and failures.

So why are so many people afraid to fail or give up when things don’t go as planned?

Your struggles are going to be real: finding a job, paying your bills, trying to find the positive in things.

But you need to think about your next move and work hard to leave things better than you found them.

Being a teen mom taught me so many things, most notably how to be resourceful.

Raising my daughter young and alone was the start of my leadership journey. It also taught me to never discount others at face value as I had been discounted for being a teen mom. I believe that those who are most undervalued often bring the most value.

Sometimes they’re the most difficult to work with but next time you come across a cranky person, try to befriend them. Discover how misunderstood and nice they REALLY are.

Maybe you’ll be surprised. Maybe you can learn from them.

Do your best to never stop learning and growing. I have a master’s degree, yet I am always signing up for different classes.

Never be afraid to ask questions.

Try to be the dumbest person in the room, or the one in the room with the least net worth. You’re thinking, “What? No way. I want to strive to be the smartest or the one with the highest net worth in room” right?

But hear me out: If you are not the smartest or the one with the biggest portfolio it will keep you striving to be better, because then you will learn so much from everyone around you. In a sense, it makes you the smartest and richest person in the room.

Did I mention that I’m in aerospace manufacturing?

Aerospace manufacturing, can you imagine? This former homeless pregnant girl is working in one of the most prestigious industries, historically known as male dominated industry, yet here I am.
Since graduating from Central, I have had the pleasure of working at Pratt and Whitney, and I work with the SEXiest machines on the planet: JET ENGINES!

I am so addicted to jet engines that I have been known to travel around the country to attend air shows and air races. I will tell you that when an F22 Raptor comes roaring by, I morph into a little girl squealing with joy and jumping around in excitement!

I am so blessed my time at Pratt has taken me all over the world in support of these magnificent machines, and I have worked so hard to get here. I have been coached and mentored at all levels at Pratt. I believe that it is because they have seen my hard work, how I develop others, my ability to be adaptable, and, of course, my passion for jet engines!

One of the things that sets me apart from my peers is that I have a different way of looking at life. For instance, when I get up every morning, I ask myself what I could do to make my bosses look good today, or what can I do to make the PW Eagle fly stronger and harder.

I do this by always looking forward and not dwelling on my past. Focusing on my future has helped to embrace my past. There are many opportunities out there; you just have to be courageous enough to get them.

As you have heard, nothing I have ever gotten in my life has been easy. I have had to work for every grade, every promotion, and every raise I have ever gotten.

Remember that being the best is a mindset. It is truly about what you want and where you see yourself in this life.

You too CAN change your STARS!

You never know, one day you might up here telling your story and how you made it, like I'm doing now.

Seek the positive in life. And if you can’t find anything positive, look me up and I can help you!

Class of ’22, congratulations on your achievement.

This is just the beginning, so remember what Yoda said, “Pass on what you have learned. Strength, mastery ... but weakness, folly, failure also. ... The greatest teacher, failure is.”

So to you my Padawans, pass on what you have learned ...