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Find the good in life's struggles, alumnus tells Troy University students

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TROY – Troy University alumnus Mackenzie Westmoreland told students on the Troy Campus on Tuesday to find the good things that grow out of life's struggles.

Westmoreland, a director and producer with Historia Films who lost his sight due to diabetic retinopathy in 2009, delivered Troy University's 20th annual Helen Keller Lecture on Tuesday in the Claudia Crosby Theater on the Troy Campus. The lecture is designed to promote awareness of people who excel in their chosen fields despite physical or mental challenges.

"We often experience fear of the unknown, but the unknown is also the address of potential and possibility," Westmoreland said. "We must reach an awareness that good things can be found in life's struggles and that success can be found despite our failures."

A resident of New York City, Westmoreland told students that his life changed just a few days short of his 40th birthday when he literally woke up blind.

"I woke up in a world of darkness. To literally wake up blind was terrifying," he said. "I sat on the side of my bed going through every 'what if' in my mind. One fear gripped me more than any other – what if I became one of those people who is easier left out than invited in?"

In the midst of his fear, Westmoreland found comfort in the words he had heard his mother speak many times during his youth – "God doesn't give you what you can't handle."

"It was those simple words that made me determined that I would not be someone who is stuck in a corner, not participating in life," he said. "I knew that I could not do it by myself, and going out as an independent blind person in New York City might be an overwhelming place to start."

Westmoreland returned to his home state of Mississippi, spending the next seven months at the Reach Center for the Blind in Tupelo. He came out of the center and returned to New York to tackle the challenges ahead.

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The challenges Westmoreland would face became even greater when he learned he had an infection in the bones of his foot and doctors were recommended amputation. To ensure his heart was strong enough to endure the surgery, the doctors believed they needed to do additional tests. The tests, however, would likely cause Westmoreland's kidneys to fail and leave him dependent on regular dialysis.

"In the course of three days, I was going to lose my leg and my kidneys," he said. "I just felt like this was too much. I had found a way to come back from my blindness, and now I was faced with this. It was in these depths that I realized that Faith means nothing if it is never tested. If I can come back from being blind, I can come back from this."

Following the surgery, Westmoreland spent two months in the hospital for rehabilitation, first learning to hobble and then to walk with a prosthetic leg.

Not to be deterred, Westmoreland gladly accepted the invitation of a longtime friend, Miles Doleac, to produce the film "The Historian." Recently released across numerous on-demand platforms and coming soon to iTunes, Amazon and Hulu, the film was the winner of "Best Feature Film," "Best Actor" and "Best Supporting Actor" awards at the 2014 Long Island International Film Expo.

Westmoreland is currently in pre-production of his second feature film, "The Hollow," which will shoot in June in Mississippi, and continues to maintain an active lifestyle in Manhattan where he recently accepted the post of president of TROY's New York Alumni Chapter.

"We have to accept and be willing to change regardless of what challenges we encounter in life," he said. "As you move down your path in life, be aware there will be obstacles and struggles. They are there for a reason."

The Helen Keller Lecture is sponsored by Troy University along with longtime university supporters including The Helen Keller Foundation for Research and Education, the Alabama State Department of Education, the Alabama Department of Rehabilitation Services, the Alabama Department of Mental Health and the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind.

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