

Rutgers University – Newark Commencement 2016

Remarks

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Thank you, Soledad!

We are so profoundly grateful that you made an immediate priority of being with us to celebrate and inspire the Class of 2016! In an age when conflicts over difference threaten peace and prosperity locally and globally, we are in such dire need of more clear-eyed storytelling of the kind Soledad has brought and continues to bring us.

Speaking of clear-eyed, I'd like to begin my brief remarks with the prophetic and inspiring words of our student editor –in- chief of The Scarlet Magazine, Zeinab Said, as her words capture so well the promise of today, this special day, with our special graduates.

In Zeinab's words:

“April Showers Bring May Flowers.

Cliché, indeed.

It has been cold, windy, snowy, slushy, slippery, and somewhat sunny. Spring has been long overdue!

Do you know what else has been long overdue? Kindness.”

She goes on to say:

“..... Gardens, like our campus, like our country, are filled with thousands of different flowers that grow at different rates and look differently, but they all need the same elements to survive...

“If plants need so much nurturing, then imagine the amount of care humans need. We get so caught up with politics, social media, jobs, school, that we forget to sit back and appreciate our surroundings and admire one another. We have so much to offer, and so much to say...”

Zeinab is so right, and today is indeed a day to sit back and appreciate our surroundings and admire one another – you have weathered the storms, soaked up the sun, become nourished by the elements, and you – our graduates – have so much to offer, so much to say – and we are poised to listen because you are the next diverse talented generation who will – who must – restore that kindness, make this a real land of opportunity, and remind us in your words and your deeds that looking different, growing at different rates, is an advantage – a real bonus – not a threat – in a world where much, including kindness, is needed from everyone.

We all saw this year how much that could mean when we lost members of our community and as their family and close friends grieved for the loss our whole community joined them and collectively faced how much kindness is needed in the face of the hardest times of life and death.

The kindness that you – our students at Rutgers-Newark – showed actually gives me much hope. I am not an optimist by nature nor is it a particularly rational attitude in this highly polarized and fundamentally unkind world; but you, especially as you graduate into your next journey, are reason for optimism, precisely because the hope you bring is not superficial or fleeting – it is based upon a record of opportunity-making, of resilience, of social connectedness and caring (not of alienation or distrust of difference).

We hear that loud and clear with poignant power in *From Where I stand*, a collection of your oral histories in the digital magazine *The Newest Americans* – for you all stand in different places, with common forthright purpose.

You know that things can get better because you have been down and gotten up and you are ready to be models for others, as your family, friends, and peers have been for you – and you know that there is no one way to get up, and that is indeed where real social connection comes in, where kindness goes way deeper than a Hallmark greeting.

Among you today is Dina Sayedahmed who writes about how her mother, who moved to America at age 25 from Libya and Egypt, without local language or culture, “hammered her resilience into us,” but how Dina went one step further, reminding herself that “..not everyone is made of resilience. Not everyone comes from where I stand, and it’s okay.” Yes, it is ok, for actually there are many ways to be resilient, many places from which to stand.

If diversity is an asset – and you can’t help but fully embrace that as you look around at the talent and vibrancy in this room today – then the appreciation, the ability to soak it up, is even more valuable in navigating the workplaces, communities, houses of worship, voting booths, marketplaces, geographies, and generations that you – our graduates – will inhabit – and that you have already tasted at Rutgers University-Newark, in Newark – a city of 350 years of resilience and multi-cultural strength.

This is the place, and this is the time, to admire how many different navigational paths there are – after all, even Siri is forced to recalculate your route when you just insist on making a different

turn. Let's celebrate today the many different turns we take, that you took, in getting here, and commit ourselves to remembering the value added of such diversity when the world relentlessly proclaims the one recipe for success, the one definition of excellence, the one way to behave, the one route to follow.

Amongst us in this great graduating class is Greg Clayton who says of his non-linear route to and through college – “I shudder to think where I might be today if I had not met my wife... so I took her advice, and decided it was time for change when our son was born. I enrolled in school and vowed to get a college degree to set an example for my children. It has not been easy, but then again anything worth doing right never is. I do not want it to be easy, I took that road once, and I do not want to travel on it anymore. From where I stand today, I am in a better place than I was five years ago, and cannot wait to see what the next five have in store.”

And we are all in a better place because you kept at it – all of you – as Jaleesa McEachin says in her Scarlet Magazine poem *Revolution?*: “This generation knows nothing about picketing signs. But they will give their dreams a chance and join pick-it lines.” We need you to join in, and give all our dreams a chance to be realized together – my memories (certainly a bit smoothed over as memories always are) of those picketing signs are distinctly of togetherness, and I for one so yearn for more of that in our world today – and I look to you for its rebirth, even in the inevitable imperfection that was then and will probably always be.

Keep at it, as you have all of your lives, and certainly here at Rutgers-Newark. For as Haminah Johnson, graduating today with a major in social work, says in her contribution to *From Where I Stand*, “Goodbye childhood memories, hello growth and opportunities.”

Take with you the example of one of the great citizens of Newark who passed last year at the age of 96, Eddiemae Livingston. She saw so much of this great city’s history, from the tragic to the triumphant. She did well as a civil servant in several mayoral administrations and she did a great deal of good—and made some history herself—with a remarkable act of kindness that she repeated for 40 years. She chose college students at random—maybe even some among you today—and gave them \$25 “scholarships” to help them in a small way with their expenses, but more importantly to send a message of optimism to whomever she touched: I believe in you.

Eddiemae also wrote two books of poetry, including these optimistic lines inspired by the resilience she saw in the people of Newark after some of the city’s most difficult days.

"When the smoke had cleared we were filled with pride
and found it hard our emotions to hide.
We all walked taller the following day
that beautiful morning in the month of May."

Walk tall as you leave here today, Class of 2016, and know that all of us here with you today are the bearers of Eddiemae’s legacy when we say: We believe in you.

Congratulations!

And now I am so pleased to introduce to you someone who walks tall, herself, bearing the mantle of leadership of her fellow students as President of the Student Governing Association, but does so with the kind of grace, wisdom, and humility that we see in our most admired leaders in public life. Please join me in welcoming Rahimah Faiq.