

**Remarks to Graduating Students  
Commencement  
May 22, 2019  
Rutgers University – Newark**

**Nancy Cantor  
Chancellor**

It is so wonderful to welcome all our Rutgers-Newark families, friends, colleagues and community partners gathered here to celebrate and cheer our terrific graduates of the class of 2019!! And listening once again to the powerful voice of our 2013 graduate Florianna Heun reminds me of the continuity of our Rutgers-Newark family, and the strength of its voice.

Indeed, we are an institution with a world class jazz archive, in a city that produced among others the great jazz musician Wayne Shorter—one of today’s remarkable honorary degree recipients—so it won’t surprise anyone that the strength of voice produced, innovated, improvised, cultivated, and flowing forth from our graduates is precisely my theme for today. Let’s hear it for strong voices!

Strong voices are precisely what higher education aims to cultivate—voices speaking up and out; voices speaking for and with others; voices speaking against; and voices speaking by listening to others and therefore learning from them— and by that measure (and many others), I am absolutely confident that the class of 2019 is off the charts—they are educated to be the next generation of strong voices. Educated to be what political theorist Harry Boyte calls citizen professionals—to quote Harry: “teachers, nurses, civil servants, bankers, therapists, public managers, scientists, and others... who do public work to turn their work sites and communities into more humane, empowering, purpose-filled places.”<sup>1</sup> Yes, I am convinced that our graduates in the class of 2019 will fill their workplaces and communities with shared purpose, speaking from a base of expertise—in the arts and sciences, business, criminal justice, law, and public affairs—and seamlessly merging that voice with the conscience of a citizen in our democracy.

So, what does a voice that seamlessly mixes expertise and citizenship sound like? It sounds like Alexis Torres Machado, graduating today, who combines his musicality and his empathy in his composition, “For My Immigrants,” singing it with force at this year’s first Undocugraduation celebration. As his message tells us

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<sup>1</sup> Harry C. Boyte, *A New Civic Covenant*, *Twin Cities Pioneer Press*, January 20, 2019.

all, when we take the time to listen hard, we hear strength and wisdom—expertise and citizenship—in the voices of as many without pedigree and passports as with them. This appreciation of the strong voices of those without, as well as those within, is in my view a true signature of Rutgers-Newark students, staff, and faculty. It could not have been more fully on display than in the final projects of the 2019 BFA graduates in graphic design in their exhibit entitled: “I Stood At The Border: im/migrant voices + stories retold.” Marilyn Gomes, in her piece entitled Language Migration, goes right to the heart of what is to be gained when people speak to each other from different corners, in different hues and syllables—as she says: “Combining different colors results in new and more values that can make the world more exciting. Likewise, the integration and merging of different people who speak different languages and lifestyles, can result in a new way of living, one in which people are not just tolerant, but appreciative of change.”

That last phrase, “not just tolerant, but appreciative of change,” goes to the heart of the inclusive voices we cultivate and depend upon to build a better world—and to speak it means to get outside of one’s own voice to give voice to others, as our remarkable student interns trained in our Lives in Translation program do as interpreters helping pro bono attorneys represent community members in Newark in need of legal aid. Through this program, with a database of 458 students covering some 48 languages, undergraduate interns give literal voice to those otherwise silenced, outside of opportunity, even as they are sometimes inside behind walls—listen to the words of one of our 2019 graduating seniors, Raydel Rijo, who interned as a sophomore, interpreting in proceedings at detention center hearings. As Raydel describes the experience of translating lives: “It is my job to interpret every word or rather meaning that the client says... The traumas and trials that most of these detainees have to go through are truly horrific, and it makes one as the interpreter look at life in a different way.” Yes, looking at life in a different way is what education is about, and it is as life-changing as anything can be.

Our graduates, our citizen professionals out in the world, never take voice for granted—sometimes because they have seen others lose it, sometimes because they lost it for a time themselves, and education brought it back with a special responsibility to use it well. Take one of last year’s 2018 graduates, Ron Pierce, who spent thirty years in prison, connecting to education first in prison through our NJ-STEP Program, and then earning his degree in justice studies here after his release, and now serving as a fellow at the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice, advocating for the restoration of voting rights for formerly incarcerated individuals. What does Ron say now about voice? He says: “Our voices matter.

Through voting we're no longer silenced. Voting empowers us and allows us to have a say in how we want to be governed." Reflecting that belief in the power and responsibilities of education and voice, I'm proud to say that our Rutgers-Newark students, including those graduating today, won this year's New Jersey Ballot Bowl, registering more voters than any other campus our size this past year—let's hear it for our engaged students! And speaking of engaged students, one of this year's Honors College graduating class, Mussab Ali, a Truman and Schwartzman Scholar awardee, took his citizen professional voice seriously, winning re-election as the youngest member of the Jersey City Board of Education—well done, Mussab! While another 2019 graduating senior, Veenit Singh, put his knowledge of climate change and the skills he learned about recycling as an intern in the NYC Department of Sanitation to work, voicing his suggestions for how we could do composting for a greener campus—yes, Veenit we are listening!

Yes, there is an urgency to speaking up and out, right here, right now, exercising a privilege of voice that not all with words of wisdom have. As Rutgers-Newark student, Marlin Campbell beautifully reminded us when he channeled the voice of the great abolitionist hero Frederick Douglass as we dedicated our athletic field, where Douglass rallied Newarkers 170 years ago in the fight for freedom, for voice, for opportunity denied by forced bondage. And this is indeed a special year as we mark too the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Liberation of Conklin Hall by the Black Organization of Students in 1969, again, right here at Rutgers-Newark, listening to those forthright voices who set this institution on its continual journey of speaking for and of and about justice, as the uncompromising voice of justice of our remarkable commencement speaker and honoree today, the scholar-activist Dorothy Roberts, so represents. And in the spirit of Dorothy Roberts, Gifty Minnow, graduating today as part of the inaugural social justice cohort of our revolutionary Honors Living Learning Community, will go on to Rutgers Law School to exercise that very privilege of voice.

Now, as all of you, our wonderfully loud and proud 2019 graduates migrate from here to follow your own paths to productivity, to citizenship, to professionalism, to what Isabel Wilkerson, who delivered the Tanner Lecture on Human Values here last month, described as the journey to *The Warmth of Other Suns*,<sup>2</sup> in cataloguing the personal experiences of three African-Americans during the Great Migration, take heart in how much you can do with your newly cultivated voices. Just as your families and faculty mentors and classmates

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<sup>2</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*, New York: Random House, 2010.

contributed immensely to the strength of your voices, to the continuity of generations spoken before, to the possibility of having something new to say, so too will you go out—I am quite sure—and share your sweet song, improvising, riffing off others' sounds, in the great jazz and Newark tradition. And in that tradition always keep an ear open to all the voices that need to be heard and then sung aloud, perhaps for the first time. Remember, no one “gave” you a voice, you had it ready, but someone needed to listen for it to be fully real. Go out now, and listen, and then speak as strongly as you can. We'll be listening for your wisdom.