

Rutgers University – Newark Commencement 2018

Remarks by Chancellor Nancy Cantor

Welcome everyone – excited graduates, proud families, friends and mentors basking in the achievements of these Rutgers University-Newark stars – and speaking of stars, I know each year at this time that the world is well when Florianna sings the national anthem to the many faces, languages, heritages, represented here (how about a round of hearty applause for Florianna and for “we the people”) – and of course we have another star, birthed in this great city, to welcome too – but we’ll wait for that – and wait with bated breath we will.

Waiting with bated breath – you, our graduates, have been doing that a long time before this day, right? Asking yourselves: Will I finish? Will they call my name so I can walk – no run—across the stage, and be done?

Well, like much of life, the answer is yes and no – yes, we will deliver you as a graduate to the world today, and you will move fast forward because those are our favored metaphors – Express Newark, as our artists tell us, and Newark Forward, as our cherished Mayor hails us on. But no, not so fast, because life keeps us busy recreating ourselves, as your fellow graduate Marsha Shnayder wisely depicted in her senior project, “Life: A Play in Multiple Acts” (on display in Robeson Galleries with those of 17 other immensely talented graphic designers graduating today).

To quote Marsha: “I mean think about it. How many phases have you been through in life? There are the obvious rites of passage from childhood to adulthood ...” (and, I’ll interrupt here to say the obvious – this is one of those big ones!) ...“but how about those many nuanced moments in between?” she asks. “That time you couldn’t read enough Holocaust-related-non-fiction, say, or that super awkward period when you insisted on attending really dreadful parties, even though you don’t really like dancing that much?”

So, we think we’re made, done, shaped, finished, and yet, as she says, “for some reason we seem to overlook the fact that our mutable selves are still mutating.” And, she adds some humor to that pronouncement, reminding us: “...that we’ll have more ridiculous former selves to laugh at before too long.” Yes, indeed, I’ll second that emotion!

And since growing one's self is hard work, we can't take each step for granted nor can we forget who in our families and communities keep pushing us up the mountain. Elise Folkerts captures that in her design project, an online mobile application she calls "Rally," where she reminds us to: "Tell someone about your victory. The best part of conquering a mountain is being able to share your experience with others."

And, dear graduates, you've climbed a lot of mountains, and our world needs to hear about those victories. Take, for example, the 5 students graduating from Rutgers-Newark today as members of our Mountainview Community of Scholars, all formerly incarcerated, who have been mentored as part of the New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons Consortium—NJ-STEP – of which we are so proud. The world needs to take note of your successes, because everyone – and I mean everyone – who does anything in life needs a second chance, the only question is who gets one and who doesn't.

Take it from Emmanuel Mervilus, a son of Haitian immigrants who was sentenced to 11 years in prison for a crime he did not commit; he served more than three years of that sentence before being proven innocent in a retrial and today will cross the stage. Emmanuel's climb, steep and long as it has been, is familiar to so many of you graduating today, if not in exact form, certainly in the striving and persistence it entailed, and the boost you received from peers and mentors alike.

At Rutgers-Newark, Emmanuel has brought extraordinary perspective to the classroom and to all of us as a member of our Honors Living-Learning Community, an extraordinary community in itself, built around a social justice curriculum and dedicated to the theme of local citizenship in a global world. Today Emmanuel will cross the stage with 12 other inaugural graduates of the Honors Living-Learning Community – all using different disciplines – from social work and law to journalism and business, to reverse some more injustices in our world.

To do that, we need the kind of organizing skills that Steven Kilawattie, graduating today, learned by teaming up with Jersey City Together, to convince their mayor to inspect the conditions of local public housing. A first-generation American of Indo-Guyanese parents and a military veteran, Steven is not without knowledge of the world, and yet here's how Steven described himself before and after that victory: "I could not really understand our world or navigate through it effectively, but now I could... because I was part of a multi-faith organization that was doing just that and will continue to do just that..." Keep at it Steven, and so too for all the many community organizers sharing the spotlight here today, because the

collective enterprise of equitable growth in our communities will take us sharing that light even more widely.

And sharing that light starts early, even before you get to Rutgers-Newark, and persists after you graduate. Just ask the students at Malcolm X Shabazz High School in Newark's South Ward, who as part of our partnership with their school, worked incredibly long hours to build solar powered suitcases that were delivered and installed recently by our Rutgers-Newark students in schools and health centers in Puerto Rico. Like everything worthwhile, this required team work, in this case with a wonderful non-profit called We Share Solar that is sending solar suitcases all over the world (in fact two of our students graduating today, Jennifer Made and Cynthia Pierre-Louis, worked on similar projects in Nicaragua). Listen to Elizabeth, a 10th grader at Shabazz, as she describes her experience connecting to the world from right here in Newark: "This project is very important to me because I have family in Puerto Rico as well as Dominican Republic that suffered due to the damage from the hurricane... So, being part of this project makes me feel like I am making a difference for someone..." Not to mention, she learned a lot of science along the way, and we hope she continues on, maybe one day joining our many Rutgers-Newark STEM graduates, like those here today.

Lighting up the world – that is what this generation of change-makers is all about – making a difference for someone and creating your own new self at every step along the way – with a lot of help from your friends! Thanks to all of our graduates here today who have so brought sunlight to our world at Rutgers-Newark, and who will now fast forward to spread the light for and with others, at home and around the world.