

Remarks of First Lady Michelle Obama – As Prepared for Delivery
University of Arkansas Pine Bluff Commencement
Pine Bluff, Arkansas
Saturday, May 8, 2010

As Prepared for Delivery –

Thank you so much. I am so thrilled and so honored to be here today to help celebrate the extraordinary young men and women of the Class of 2010.

Thank you, Chancellor Davis, for that very kind introduction, and for continuing your family tradition of inspired leadership at this university.

I also want to recognize Governor Mike Beebe and Mrs. Ginger Beebe, Senators Blanche Lincoln and Mark Pryor, Representative Mike Ross, Attorney General Dustin McDaniel and Mayor Carl Redus.

Thanks also to Carl L. Johnson, Vice Chairman of the University of Arkansas Board of Trustees, the members of the Board of Trustees and B. Alan Sugg, President of the University of Arkansas System.

And graduates, let's all take a moment to thank the unsung heroes here today – your families: the folks who pushed you and believed in you, the folks who answered all those late night phone calls, even when you were just calling to ask for money, the folks whose love sustains you every single day.

Because today is their day too. So let's give them a round of applause.

Finally, to the stars of today's show, the class of 2010 – congratulations, we are all so proud of you.

You've worked so hard and invested so much of yourselves.

During your time here, your teachers have become mentors, your classes have become passions and career ambitions and your classmates have become lifelong friends.

From the day you arrived as freshmen, you have taken all this school has to offer and made it your own.

And in doing so, you've become part of a proud tradition – one that began 135 years ago, just a decade past slavery, on that September day when the Branch Normal College first opened its doors.

Things were very different back then.

There were no lecture halls or dorm rooms, no athletic facilities or libraries.

The first campus was little more than a run-down frame house in desperate need of repairs.

The first class consisted of just seven students, some of whom could barely read at a first grade level.

Life was full of uncertainty for these students.

There was no clear path to success – no guarantee of opportunity when they graduated.

Still, with hope in their hearts, and faith in their God-given potential, they came here anyway, they came to do the only thing they could – they came to learn.

Just imagine how those seven students would feel if they could see all of you here today?

If they could see how their tiny schoolhouse has become the Flagship of the Delta – a great university with a network of alumni across this country.

Imagine their pride in seeing all this institution has accomplished: the Vesper Choir performing at the Vatican; the ROTC program producing a U.S. Army General; the Golden Lions making it to the NCAA tournament; and generations of doctors, lawyers, educators and others who have gone on to improve the lives of millions.

And do you think they could ever have dreamed that their school band would be chosen to march at the inaugural parade of a United States President, and that President would be an African American man named Barack Obama?

Graduates, when you think about how far you've come, when you think about how far this university has come, it just once again reminds you that God is good.

And today, we celebrate not just your achievements, but the achievements of all those who came before you, those who poured everything they had into building this school and giving you opportunities they never could've imagined for themselves.

But even today, with all the progress that's been made, and all that you've achieved, I know that for so many of you, the journey hasn't been easy.

Many of you probably grew up like me in neighborhoods where few had the chance to go to college where being teased for wanting academic success was a fact of life, where well-meaning, but misguided folks questioned whether a girl with a background like mine could succeed at a school like Princeton.

But like me you knew you wanted something more.

Just like those first seven students at this school, something inside of you drove you to set your sights higher.

It was that internal drive that kept you focused, kept you out of trouble, and earned you admission to this University.

I'm sure you all remember the joy you felt when you opened those acceptance letters.

But I'm sure that some of you also remember the initial shock you experienced when you first arrived on campus – and realized that the expectations were perhaps a little higher and the work was harder than anticipated.

But that didn't stop you instead, you dug deep, you stepped up your game – and ultimately earned yourself that diploma.

But now, after all you've done to get this far after all of your achievements and struggles a new set of challenges awaits.

Suddenly, you're facing a future of debt in the form of tens of thousands of dollars of student loans – and you've got to find a job that will start paying the bills before the bill collectors come knocking.

I know the feeling. It wasn't that long ago that my husband and I were still paying off our own loans.

It can start to feel like each time you overcome one obstacle and achieve something big, another obstacle is right there to take its place.

The bar is set, then you work as hard as you can to reach that bar, and just when you think you've finally reached it, the bar moves even higher – even farther out of reach.

And I know that can be frustrating – particularly for young people like you who've been raised in a popular culture that doesn't always value hard work and commitment, a culture that instead glorifies easy answers and instant gratification, the fast food, the instant messaging, the easy credit.

Your generation has come of age in a culture that celebrates fleeting reality TV fame rather than the hard labors of lasting success.

It's a culture that elevates today's celebrity gossip over the serious issues that will shape our future for decades to come.

It's a culture that tells us that our lives should be easy, that suffering and struggle should be avoided at all costs, and that we can have everything we want without a whole lot of effort.

But we all know that life really doesn't work that way.

Despite all those promises of easy money and fast profits, how many businesses do you know that succeed without the hard work and serious investments to produce a quality product?

Despite all those expectations of instant progress and overnight change, how many leaders do you know that have made lasting contributions without major trials and setbacks along the way?

It took decades of struggle to end slavery, for women to earn the right to vote, and for us to free ourselves from the scourge of segregation.

And we all remember what happened to our economy when we succumbed to the lure of easy credit, too-good-to-be-true-mortgages, and assurances that it's just fine to spend way beyond our means.

So graduates, I'd like to suggest that – contrary to what you might see on TV or in the tabloids – few things worth achieving happen in an instant, and there's often great value in great struggle.

I'm here to suggest that it's only by embracing, rather than shrinking from challenges, it's only by setting and striving for our own ambitious bars that we become what we are truly meant to be.

Think for a moment about those first seven students at this school.

They arrived here at a time when newly freed people had few opportunities beyond sharecropping, when oppressive "black codes" still limited their freedom, and lynching and mob violence were facts of life.

They had been raised in a society that viewed them not as potential students, or professionals, or even citizens – but as property – unfit for, and undeserving of, an education.

But something inside of them rejected that notion.

Somehow, they were able to see beyond what they had been told.

Somehow, they held fast to their own vision of themselves – as scholars, as future teachers, as human beings with something worthy to contribute.

And that same defiant courage, that same spirit of self-determination, has fueled the success of countless students in every generation since.

Consider the example of Dr. Samuel Kountz, class of 1952.

He performed the first kidney transplant between people who weren't identical twins.

And over the years, his pioneering research has made countless other transplants possible.

Believe it or not, back when he first applied to this school as a young man, he actually failed the entrance examination.

But he didn't give up on his dream of an education.

He didn't withdraw his application.

He simply decided that his test score didn't reflect his true potential and he appealed straight to the university President, who agreed, and admitted him despite his scores.

And think about how many lives have been saved, and how much medical progress has been made, because Samuel Kountz believed more in himself than in some number on a page.

And people like Dr. Kountz are everywhere.

They are sitting among you here today.

Consider the journey of Quiana Childress who's graduating today with a degree in biology.

Quiana grew up in a tiny town in a family that struggled just to keep the lights on and the water running – and at the age of 16, she became homeless.

In order to provide for herself, she found work as a nursing assistant.

And living out of a car, she'd go to school during the day, and she'd work late nights and weekends at her job, sometimes up to 16 hours a day.

Every day was hard. Every day was exhausting.

And one day at work, when she was just about ready to throw in the towel, Quiana thought for a moment, not about her own struggles, but about those of her patients.

She thought about how sick they were and how much pain they were in.

And at that moment she realized – as she put it, and I quote: “they needed me more than I needed to give up.”

At that moment, Quiana found herself, she found her true calling in life – to be a doctor.

And it's not just her prestigious internships or her near-perfect GPA that will help her fulfill that dream.

It's the compassion she has for others' suffering that comes from having suffered so much herself.

It's her burning desire to rise above her circumstances – her unrelenting belief that she can succeed despite all evidence to the contrary.

All of that will not just make Quiana a good doctor – but an extraordinary one.

And think for a moment about the improbable endeavor that was my husband's campaign for President.

He'd be the first to tell you that he wasn't the likeliest candidate for that office.

He didn't start out with many connections or much money or name recognition.

And when he first began campaigning out in Iowa and New Hampshire, most folks whose hands he shook and homes he visited had no idea who he was.

But Barack Obama didn't get discouraged.

He didn't listen to the pundits who said that someone like him could never get elected.

Instead, he listened to his gut which told him that this country is less cynical, less divided, less selfish than some may think.

He listened to his heart, which told him he had an obligation to serve and to give back to this country that had given him so much.

And no matter how long those campaign days got, or how low his poll numbers dropped, that's what motivated him, that's what sustained him, that's what saw him through to the end.

And ultimately, all those ups and downs, all those long hours on the campaign actually helped him build up the stamina that now serves him every day as President of the United States.

See that's the thing about striving in the face of adversity – often, it's the hardship and sacrifices that make you stronger.

Often, the harder you have to fight to achieve your goals, the more endurance you build up – not just physical and emotional, but spiritual as well.

Many of you know from experience that the moments of greatest trial and tragedy that shake our souls – those moments don't shatter or weaken our faith, they strengthen and deepen it.

It's easy to have faith when things are good – when everyone's healthy, and you can pay the bills, and life is going according to plan.

But the faith that comes easy won't always sustain you when times are hard.

The faith you need then – the bone-deep kind of faith that gets you through your darkest hours – that kind of faith is only earned when it's tested.

Think about Dr. Martin Luther King, who spoke at this school's commencement back in 1958.

He'd been arrested and put on trial for his work.

His house had been bombed, and his life had been threatened.

But he came here on a Spring day half a century ago and after all he had seen, and all he'd been through, Dr. King told that graduating class - and I quote: "Now we stand on the border line of the promised land."

And he spoke of a day when "...all men can stand together, black and white, Jew and gentile, Protestant and Catholic and sing another song - 'free at last, free at last'."

Dr. King refused to let the world as it was dissuade him from his vision of the world as it should be.

And not just in spite of what he'd endured, but because of what he'd endured, Dr. King still had faith.

He still had, in the words of Scripture, the faith that is "...the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Now, I want to be clear: I'm in no way suggesting that hardship, injustice and inequality are somehow acceptable or justifiable because they can make people stronger.

And I'm certainly not suggesting that the only path to success requires overcoming obstacles thrust upon you.

Plenty of folks who've been raised in privilege have gone on to change the world because they had the discipline and drive to set high expectations for themselves, to use their resources to meet those expectations - and to pull others up along the way.

And I expect nothing less from those of you who've been fortunate in your lives.

My point is simply that life is complicated, human beings are imperfect and struggle and hardship will always be with us in some form or another.

But that has never been the end of our story - either as individuals or as a nation - but only the beginning.

For ours is a story of folks who traveled great distances to build a better life, folks who marched, and fought, and bled, folks who risked everything they had because they wanted something more for their children.

It's the story of folks like your parents and grandparents who may not have had the chance to go to college themselves, but who saved, and sacrificed so that you could go, so that you could have opportunities they never imagined for themselves.

They didn't do all that so that you could have it easy.

And they didn't do all that so that you could spend your lives breathlessly reaching for whatever bars others set for you.

They did it so that you could set your own high bars.

They did it so that you could discover for yourselves that the things that truly matter in life are the bars that don't move: families that love you, work that's meaningful, a community that embraces you, the chance to make a contribution that is lasting.

Those are the bars that count.

I think that Dr. Dorothy Height – the godmother of the civil rights movement whose recent passing we mourn – put it best.

When discussing why she kept up the fight for civil and economic rights all throughout her life, she said, simply, "This is my life's work. It is not a job."

And that is what I wish for all of you graduates today.

I wish for you the kind of trials that help you discover your life's work and give you the strength and faith to pursue it.

I wish for you a life lived not in response to the doubts or fears or desires of others, but in pursuit of passions, hopes and dreams that are your very own.

And whenever you get discouraged – and you will, when you start to lose heart and you want to give up – and you will, I want you to think about all those who came before you.

I want you to tell yourself that if Quiana Childress can go from being homeless to graduating with the highest GPA not just in the biology department, but in the entire School of Arts and Sciences then surely, you can overcome whatever adversity you face in your own life.

Tell yourself, if Dr. Samuel Kountz could appeal directly to this university's President and insist that he deserved a place at this school, then surely you can see to it that your own gifts never go to waste.

And if those seven students could have the audacity to take their place here 135 years ago, if they could insist on fulfilling their God-given potential and staking their claim on the promise of this great nation, then surely, all of you can too.

May their legacy be your inspiration.

And I wish you Godspeed and every blessing on the road ahead. Thank you.