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Remarks Delivered at 2009 Commencement

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Nancy Cantor
Chancellor & President, Syracuse University
Remarks Delivered at 2009 Commencement
May 10, 2009

I want to offer a warm welcome to the families and friends of the Syracuse University Class of 2009. Congratulations from all the members of the university community! I'd like to ask our faculty, staff, parents, and friends to stand and join me in giving the Class of 2009 a huge round of applause – aren't they wonderful!

And now I want to ask the 2009 graduates to stand and join me in thanking your families---especially your mothers on Mother's Day---your professors, and your friends with another round of applause.

As we stand here at the crossroads, a community that has grown together in many ways over your years at Syracuse, we are facing the best and the worst of times on the road forward.

It's a good time to think about a decision made by today's speaker, Vice President Joe Biden, just after he graduated from the SU College of Law and joined a prestigious law firm. He went to civil court and watched a colleague argue a case on behalf of a client who was being sued by a young welder who had been badly burned on the job.

The welder had needed to squeeze into a tight work space, so he hadn't put on his safety clothes. Under the law, he was therefore negligent

and would likely lose the case. But Joe Biden couldn't stop thinking about the man, who was badly disfigured and would possibly get nothing.

"I wasn't built to look the other way," he later wrote. He quit his law firm and went to work for the public defender's office, even though it could offer only part time work, and he had a growing family. He took another part time job at a different law firm and worked weekends as a lifeguard.

"*I wasn't built to look the other way*." Now, I like to think this is a bit of the Syracuse in Joe Biden. For we don't look the other way here, and you certainly haven't in your years here.

You've looked directly in the faces of children in our under-resourced schools and seeing their talent you joined Say Yes to Education. You've looked in each others' faces and seeing what you didn't know, you joined CARE Dialogues, conversations about race and ethnicity. You've looked around the dining halls and seeing wasteful grease you've turned it into biodiesel fuel. You've looked at family recipes and seen entrepreneurial opportunities to join Syracuse's Southside to the world markets. You've looked at deteriorating buildings and turned them into bright, vibrant urban video displays, while you wrapped buses with designs to embrace us all.

You didn't look the other way; you walked right on forward, turning what you know into what you can do. You prepared your selves for the challenges of this world by learning *in* it – for you, the pressing issues of our time are not just "academic" – they are real. You know what we must do to turn our schools, our neighborhoods, our environment, our health, our social

conflicts, our economies around. You know what local-global resonance is all about, and you know the power of cultural diplomacy and the reach of the digital media. You know that it is all too easy to think you are connected, and ever so hard to cultivate true empathy of mind – the kind that entails making oneself vulnerable as you open up to others.

Of course, even with these tremendous skills, these times call for the best in us, for all that we've learned about sustaining our connections with others. Unlike what might have been expected, there are very few clear paths for you to take out there now, few if any comfortable niches, and quite a lot to test your entrepreneurial facility. We frequently speak at Syracuse of coloring outside the lines – well, the world you are entering is closer to a Jackson Pollack than a Monet.

It certainly won't be easy, but you really are up to it, for you have stared it in the face and seen the creativity and courage that is required by everyday people, every day, to make things work. You've been involved in communities, you've helped create communities, and you've thought about what it takes to do this. You've learned across disciplines, across geographies, and across peoples – you've prepared for the world *in* the world.

At this point, you are not built to look the other way. So take a deep breath, reflect on all that you have accomplished – for it is a lot – and then get ready again to look in the face of challenge. You will see possibility, even in these uncertain times. And since you know how to look, the world

will see you coming! And they will take note, for this really is *your* time to glow. Congratulations!

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce my colleague and friend, Dr. Cornelius B. “Neil” Murphy, President of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, to deliver his greetings.

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