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### Commencement Address

Kent Syverud  
*Syracuse University*

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# Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on Sunday, May 10, 2015

Location: Carrier Dome

Remarks: Commencement Address

*The Chancellor was introduced by Interim Vice Chancellor and Provost,  
Liz Liddy*

Welcome everyone – graduates, faculty, staff, family, friends – to the class of 2015 Commencement of SUNY-ESF and Syracuse University.

It my great honor to welcome you. I will be followed in this welcome by the outstanding President of SUNY-ESF, Quentin Wheeler.

Dr. Wheeler started his position in 2014.

He is an internationally recognized entomologist and environmental leader who came here after a glorious career at Cornell University and Arizona State University.

Welcome to the Class of 2015.

This is a happy day. Each of you who are graduating today got here because of your own hard work. Each of you who are graduating today also got here because of people who have had faith in you. You are surrounded right now by people who have faith both in you and in your future.

Some of those people – your faculty and the staff – are sitting in front of you and working all around this Dome and outside it. Some of the people who support you – your family and your classmates – are right behind you and next to you, where once again, as always, they have your back.

I want to very briefly speak to you, the class of 2015, about the people who support you.

First about your faculty and the staff, at both Syracuse and ESF. We of the faculty and staff learned so much from you, the graduates of 2015. You enriched our lives with ideas and questions and problems and initiatives. You changed us through your achievements in class, in competition, in the wild and around the world. You were unique in your take on things and in what you did here. That is why we will miss you, and why the new students coming here in a few short weeks can never replace you. On behalf of your faculty and staff, I thank you.

About your family. Your parents and grandparents, spouses and partners, children and relatives. Your friends who have become like your family. Some of them are here today and some of them, so important to you, could not be here, because they are separated by distance or by health or in some cases by tragedy. About your family, seen and unseen today, I say this: You learned a lot in this place.

It may take many of you years to appreciate just how much you learned and who you learned it from. But what we the faculty added here was just a tiny increment compared to what you came here with, thanks to your family. The wonderful person your families sent here is still inside you, and still defines you, beyond our poor power to gild or to alter.

I say this each year and I say this because your families are having many mixed feelings right now, on this Mother's day. Sure, they are proud. Sure, they are relieved. But most of all, they are feeling wonder.

You think you know what wonder is. You think of wonder when you are in the wild on a moonless night and you watch all the stars come out in glory. You think of wonder when you see your child born in front of you, or when someone hands you your child for the first time that there is a piece of your soul – your kid- who will be moving around the world

accomplishing things. I tell you, I have seen those things. They are cause for wonder.

But it is even more a cause for wonder when one of your own kids or your own family, accomplishes something that you know you cannot do. Well, today your parents, your family are seeing their kid graduate from a great university. You not only are graduating, but so many of you have accomplished wonders here. Your family looks on in wonder, as well as in joy and relief.

And they are still worried about you too. They look at you in your cap and gown, and they remember the kid who was once desperately sick, or in trouble, or absolutely infuriating, or just plain lost. They remember you too well, for you have aged them. They will continue to worry about you, about your job, your family and your future. But I say to them not today. Today, the worry and even the wonder should be overcome by an abiding faith in you and in your future.

I want to confirm that faith by speaking on behalf of the grandparents-- the grandmothers and grandfathers of today's graduates. Some of your grandparents are here today. Most of your grandparents could not be here. I honor them, wherever they may be. If every one of those grandparents were here, I think I know what they would say to you. I know because I remember what my grandmother said to me shortly after I graduated from law school.

My grandmother's family came to the United States from Norway late in the 19th century. They lived at first in a sod hut on the prairie in South Dakota. A sod hut was made of strips of grass, turf peeled off the prairie. Because they could not afford lumber. My grandmother endured through two world wars, a depression, and the 1960's. She left her farm after the dust bowl and became a piano teacher. She stayed cheerful and engaged through all of it. In her eighties, she was still going door to door campaigning for ballot propositions.

She could not travel to my law school graduation in 1981, so right after graduation I drove to South Dakota to visit her. She was 84 and suffered from arthritis. I drove up to her tiny house and there she was. Pushing a lawn mower, cutting her grass. She had figured out that she could still mow her yard if she tied one hand to the mower handle with a cloth. I leaped out of the car, rushed over to her. I told her to stop. I told her grandmother you could not do this. Big mistake.

She turned from the mower, looked me square in the eye, poked a bony finger on my chest, and told me what I suspect every one of your grandparents would say to you today.

“Kent, don’t you ever let anyone tell you that you can’t do something. If it really matters, if you know it needs doing, you will always find a way.”

And then my grandmother left me standing there and returned to mowing her lawn.

Class of 2015, we will miss you, we are proud of you and we have faith in you today and always. You will find a way. Thank you!

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