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Chancellor's 2016 Commencement Speech

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Recommended Citation

Syverud, Kent, "Chancellor's 2016 Commencement Speech" (2016). *Chancellor's Office (2004 - 2013)*. 137.
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SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on May 15, 2016

Location: Carrier Dome

Remarks: Chancellor's 2016 Commencement Speech

*The Chancellor was introduced by Elizabeth Liddy
Interim Vice Chancellor and Provost.*

Welcome everyone—graduates, faculty, staff, alumni, family, friends, trustees.

Welcome to the class of 2016 Syracuse University Commencement.

I will be followed in this welcome and farewell by the outstanding President of SUNY-ESF, my friend, Quentin Wheeler.

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 so many who have faith in you.

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 and have faith in you—friends, family, classmates—are right behind you and next to you, where once again, as always, they have your back.

Some of the people who have supported you are watching this ceremony through the webcast from all around the world.

I thank every single person, here in the Dome, or around the world, who helped each of you arrive at this glorious day.

Syracuse University is full of dedicated faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees who give their hearts and souls for this place and especially for the students in it. These are people who are there when you need them. There are many such people here today, some of whom are retiring from positions as you graduate.

They include Interim Provost Liz Liddy, Deans Ann Clark of VPA and James Steinberg of the Maxwell School, Interim Dean Stanton of the iSchool, and the incomparable Floyd Little. Please join me in thank them all.

Class of 2016, as you graduate from Syracuse today, in front of all of these luminaries, I ask you to reflect on one person:

Otto.

Otto is our mascot. An orange. Otto has three important things to say to you.

First, Otto is unique and that is just fine.

Some people would say Otto is fat. A fruit. No clear gender. Indeed unique. Does that mean Otto is not part of us; Otto does not help define us? No. If I have learned one thing about you, the class of 2016, is that the only thing that is truly normal about a Syracuse student is that every single one of you is unique. That is what is so wonderful about this sprawling, idiosyncratic, inspiring place: there is no one normal, other than that at our best each of us can be unique.

So, now you go out into that cold world. Some days you will look at yourself in the mirror, or you will look at a new co-worker or someone you meet, and you will find yourself seeing someone who is “fat” or “strange” or “different.” At that moment I want you to stop and think of Otto. I want you to say, that’s Otto. Otto is just part of who we are at our best.

Second, Otto has a disability, and that is just fine.

As all of you know, Otto cannot talk. Otto never talks. Even when someone drops a beer keg on Otto’s foot, no words come out. I have seen this. Just because Otto cannot talk, does it mean Otto cannot do things? Of course not. Otto is everywhere, an integral part of this place, not really a mascot at all but part of our spirit. Otto can’t talk, but Otto somehow speaks for us all, in victory and in defeat.

So, now you go out into that cold world. Please remember that a warm Syracuse at its best didn’t just “include” someone with a disability, Syracuse embraced someone with a disability and empowered that person with the disability to make us better. We all have our secret and not-so secret challenges, and some of them do not show on the outside. They may not rise to the level of disability, but we can let them hold us back just the same.

I have several. You know what one of mine is? I have a deep, irrational anxiety about speaking in public. This is true. But at Syracuse, I just look to Otto. Otto can't speak, and yet Otto runs out in front of 30,000 people in the Dome and ten people at a local pancake breakfast every day, and just does the job, which is usually to make people better. Whatever your challenge, whatever your disability, remember Otto.

Third and finally, underneath Otto's skin, Otto's peel, there is a decent human being.

One of the joys of my job is that once in a very long while I get to do something that no one else at the University can do. This year, I asked to meet Otto. Not the mascot, but the human being underneath. And when I did, I discovered that Otto is really a group of selfless students, just like you. They have majors and jobs and dreams and challenges and disabilities. They are members of teams and churches and clubs and societies. And on top of everything else they do, they go out there every day and smile as Otto: they hug a kid, they lead a cheer, they help out. As it turns out, Otto is like each of you. So much of this place is driven by similar groups of selfless students – from SU Ambulance to Zamboni Revolution; From Student Association to University Union.

So, now you go out there into the cold world. Remember that this place was made so much better when you did something extra, beyond your regular job, with a group of selfless colleagues. You can do that in the world too, and make it more like Syracuse.

Class of 2016, Otto is graduating today. I mean that literally. Sitting among you, looking just like you in cap and gown, are selfless students who were Otto. But I also mean that every body who is graduating today is Otto to me. Even though you look the same right now in cap and gown, I know that underneath that skin is a wonderful, unique, person, who can, like Otto, show kindness to strangers, and sometimes thereby entertain angels without knowing it.

Class of 2016, whatever you look like on the outside, we at Syracuse will always remember one thing, including when you are in need or when you have a triumph or a tragedy. Every single one of you, whatever you look like on the outside, whatever you were born with or have become, as far as we are concerned your peel will forever be ORANGE.

Thank you, and Fare well.

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