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Fall Undergraduate Convocation

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on August 25, 2016

Location: Carrier Dome

Remarks: Convocation

Good evening. On behalf of my colleagues on the faculty and staff, I welcome you to Syracuse University.

I will be followed in this welcome by Professor Duncan Brown. Professor Brown is an outstanding researcher, mentor, and teacher. In January, he was recognized as the first Charles Brightman Endowed Professor of Physics. And most recently he has played a key leadership role in the multinational Laser Interferometer Gravitational-Wave Observatory (LIGO) team. Professor Brown and his fellow researchers confirmed the existence of gravitational waves by observing the collision of two black holes. They thus found the first physical proof for a prediction made by Albert Einstein.

To the incoming 2016 students, you have come here to become part of a great, engaged, thriving, diverse international research university. Syracuse is a lively and sprawling and dynamic and idiosyncratic place. It has a glorious and complex history. I want to especially acknowledge one portion of that history now: I acknowledge, with respect, the Onondaga Nation, the indigenous people on whose ancestral lands we now stand.

Today we welcome more than 4,000 new students - first year students and transfers - to these grounds where so many have come before. We will hear speeches. We will sing a song. We will say a lot of hellos and goodbyes. And the new students will receive and accept the Syracuse University charge. That sounds pretty simple. Yet those simple things will cause many emotions, and most of all wonder.

In a few moments, Dean of Admissions Maurice Harris will ask the new students to rise for the charge. I will read a few sentences to you and you will, like many students before you, undertake to live those sentences while you are here. The words I will speak to you,

and the words you will speak to me, are adapted from words first spoken on these grounds 145 years ago in 1871, by a man who became Syracuse's Chancellor, Erastus Haven.

I have heard this charge many times. I still wonder at it. Chancellor Haven told students that education is not something bestowed on you, but something you earn through hard work, discipline, and seriousness of intent. He urged that a good education encompasses a full range of disciplines, from the arts to the humanities to the sciences. He believed that you students learn not only from your teachers but from your peers, and that in the process you will become a teacher yourself with friendships that will last a lifetime. I stand here today in wonder that Chancellor Haven in 1871 could so accurately imagine what each of you will experience in 2016.

I stand here in wonder. I ask each of you to nurture a capacity for wonder in this at times cynical and negative age. A capacity for wonder is THE key attribute each of you needs in order to embrace a great university. When I started college long ago, I was so desperate to succeed socially and academically that for months I lost a capacity for wonder. I kept my head down, asked no questions, met few new people and fewer new ideas. I thought I knew with absolute certainty where I needed to get to and how I was going to get there. And I struggled academically and socially and in every other sense, until I rediscovered wonder.

Wonder is about two things. It is about noticing what you don't understand and asking why. And it is about being open to the awe and joy of learning or discovering something new, someone different, some place that is truly wonderful. If you have a capacity for wonder at this great University, you will never lack for wonderful experiences.

Almost everything that happens here - almost everything that has happened here - started out because someone, usually a student, wonders "why". Students wondered why the University's colors needed to be pink, and they drove the decision for Syracuse to become Orange. That was in 1890. Students wondered why there could not be a better way to move into Syracuse Residence halls - and invented the Goon squad, who moved you in this week. They did that in 1944. Students wondered about the universe, and had a role in proving one of the great scientific theories of the century. That was in 2016, with the assistance of Professor Duncan Brown.

There are thousands people and clubs and activities and majors and courses and opportunities here, each one a chance for you to experience wonder. Incoming 2016 students, when you hear and accept the charge that dates back to 1871, I ask you to have the capacity to wonder how you can make this University your own - how you can ask something here, build something here, prove something here, leave something behind here, that you alone uniquely contribute.

We all want to help you do that, because this University is nothing less than the accumulation of all the wonders that thousands of students and faculty have made before you.

To the parents and families and loved ones of the incoming class of 2016 - all of you sitting in the upper deck. You are no doubt experiencing a different kind of wonder.

I have dropped one of my kids off at college many times. I know how you feel. I have been there.

I was happy that my kid was starting a great university.

I was scoping out the residence hall and the roommate and the food and course schedule.

But I had a knot deep in my stomach. I wondered how I was going to adjust to having a piece of my soul, my kid, walking around a campus far away, beyond my ability to completely control or protect or influence.

My wife, mother-in-law, my family and I had poured so much into each our children - so much time and love and energy and worry and inspiration. It was a labor of love, but it was labor, and we got very used to it. It defined the best part of our lives.

And then suddenly there I was in a vast auditorium, and some president or dean in a robe on a stage was telling me it was time to go home, to leave my kid behind. I hated that president. He did not know my kid. He did not have a clue how much love and work and joy our whole family had poured into that kid to make attendance at a university possible. That president had not seen all the times that my kid had triumphed, let alone all the times he had been sick, or troubled, or just plain infuriating. That president did not know that our family was not just dropping off our kid in some abrupt divorce. Instead, we were embracing a transition while our uniquely constituted family remained very much intact, including with our kid in college.

Parents, families, loved ones: At Syracuse University, we do know these things. We do know that you want to continue to be there for your kid who is now an adult. We do know that you want to be there for them in different ways that match the tremendous achievement of starting one of your own at a great university. We do know this because so many of us have sat where you sit today, including me. We do know this because so many of us, including half of the deans on this stage, and our provost, are the first in their family to go to university.

Parents and family, thank you for all you have done and will do for the members of the 2016 entering class. Like all at Syracuse University, I know and I daily reflect in wonder and in awe at the magnificent human beings you have sent us. Because of your work, these students are our most sacred trust.

Good luck to all of you, students and loved ones. And congratulations.

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