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Fall Convocation for New Students

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on August 24, 2017

Location: Dome

Remarks: Fall Convocation for New Students

The Chancellor was introduced by James Franco, President of the Student Association

Good evening. We've clapped for a lot of people but can we clap for one more group, which is a great University marching band.

On behalf of my colleagues on the faculty and staff, and on behalf of more than a quarter of a million Orange alumni, I welcome you to Syracuse University.

I'm going to followed in this welcome by Professor Charisse L'Pree. Professor L'Pree is an outstanding researcher, mentor, and teacher. She teaches Communications and Media Studies in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. Professor L'Pree's work includes research in the fields of anthropology, sociology, political science, medicine and engineering. Professor L'Pree has been funded through the National Institutes of Health, the California HIV/AIDS Research Program, and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

To the incoming 2017 students: you have come here to become part of a great university. This is a lively and sprawling and dynamic place, with a glorious and complex history. A history in the sciences, in the arts, in humanities, in the professions. In sports, in public affairs, in communications and architecture and education and engineering and law, management and information and veterans and in serving humanity.

I welcome all of you, more than 5,000 new students to Syracuse—first year students and transfers; master’s students, professional students, and doctoral students.

You come from all over the nation and the world. From every state, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, D.C., and more than 70 nations on six continents, as well as more than a dozen Native American nations. Every single one of you equally belongs here. As far as all of us are concerned, you are now all equally and forever orange.

It is a great thing to be Orange.

Being orange means you will work hard and learn a lot, inside and outside class.

Being orange means people will and should be kind to you—including people who look and seem completely different from you—they will be kind to you because you are orange, exactly like them.

Being orange means there is nowhere you can go on earth, from New York City to Beijing; from North Dakota to North Korea, from a mosque to a synagogue to a church, indeed to the international space station—there is nowhere you can go without finding someone else who is orange and who wants to help you.

Today is such an important day in your process of becoming orange. Today you will hear speeches. You will sing a song, our song. You will say a lot of hellos and goodbyes. And you will receive and accept the Syracuse University charge. That sounds pretty simple. Yet those simple things will cause many emotions.

In a few minutes, Dean of Admissions Maurice Harris will ask the new students to rise for the charge. I then get to read a few sentences to you and you will—like thousands upon thousands of Orange students before you—

you will 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 here 146 years ago in 1871, by a man who became Syracuse's Chancellor, Erastus Haven.

I have heard this charge a lot of 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 learn not only from your teachers but from your peers, and that in the process you both 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 2017.

I stand here in wonder. And I ask that each of you to nurture a capacity for wonder in this at times polarized and cynical and negative age.

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 University, you will never lack for wonderful experiences.

Almost everything that happens here—almost everything good that has ever 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, at Syracuse University.

There are thousands of people and clubs and activities and majors and courses and opportunities here, each one a chance for you to experience wonder. Incoming 2017 students, when you hear and accept this charge, 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, how you can build something here, how you can challenge something here, how you can prove something here, how you can 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 and staff have made before you.

Now I want to turn and speak to you folks on the Upper Decks in this Dome.

To the parents and families and loved ones of the incoming class of 2017. You are now orange too. You are now, however, 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 because I have been there. I was happy that my kid was starting a great university. I was checking out the residence hall and the roommate and the food and the 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 on a campus far away, beyond my ability to completely control or protect or influence.

My wife, and my mother-in-law and my family and I had poured so much into each of our children - so much time and so much love and so much energy and so much 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 my kid had been sick, or troubled, or just plain infuriating. That president did not seem to understand that our family was not 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 a kid in college.

What I want to say to you in the Upper Decks: 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 2017 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 now orange, and they are now our most sacred trust.

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

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