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Coming Back Together Reunion Gala

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud
Delivered on September 16, 2017
Location: Marriot Syracuse Downtown
Remarks: Coming Back Together Reunion Gala

The Chancellor was introduced by author, anchor, and reporter, Cheryl Wills, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Class of '89.

Good evening and welcome home to your University. *Buenas tardes y bienvenido a su Universidad.*

All of us at Syracuse University are so happy to see you here. This is our 12th and by far the largest Coming Back Together (CBT) reunion. There are roughly 830 registrants, more than double the attendance of the 2014 CBT.

I thank those who made this extraordinary turnout possible. First, the Office of Program Development. I especially thank Assistant Vice President Rachel Vassel, an alumna who has taken the torch ably from the wonderful Larry Martin, and who has brought her skills and talent to Syracuse to help create new opportunities for students of color.

I thank the Special Events team and the staff in the Division of Communications and Marketing for driving interest and attendance at all the events this past week. I thank the Marriot Downtown, for working so hard to host us.

And, I especially thank our co-chairs Gwynne Wilcox and Jesse Mejia, who have presided over the best CBT ever. Gwynne and Jesse and so many others in this room have demonstrated the power and strength of a tightly woven alumni network. You have built upon a proud history that

began 34 years ago with the first CBT reunion. At the time, it was the only one of its kind in the nation, dedicated to alumni of color.

Twelve CBT reunions have each helped strengthen the legacy of Syracuse University as a national leader in inclusion, equity and diversity. I am the fourth Chancellor to have learned how much CBT does for our University and our community, and I am deeply grateful.

It has been a turbulent and polarized time for our country and indeed for the world. In the last few months, not a week has gone by without a significant and often troubling development in the country or the world. These events have then reverberated across our campus, and often called for a university response. We have seen challenges to free speech, challenges from the empowerment of white supremacists, challenges from changes in immigration policy, and challenges from changing national policy on military service by transgender citizens.

I want you to know that your university has taken a position on these issues, and these positions have not been popular with everyone. Yet, in these moments, the University spoke up. We took a position not because we are a political institution, but because our highest responsibility is to our students. At this diverse and inclusive university, every single one of our students matters. Every single one of our students is orange and is part of this community. Every single one of our students has the potential for greatness, and every single one of our students needs all of us to show our support and our faith in their potential. When events in Syracuse or in the world threaten this faith for some of our students—when events threaten some of us who are Orange—all of us who are Orange need to speak and act on our students behalf.

Three years ago, at this CBT gala, the most common question I was asked was this: “Is there going to be another CBT in 2017”. I sure hope you see that question has been answered, now and for the future. The second most common question was: “Do you, Chancellor, remain committed to

strengthening Syracuse's commitment to people of color at this University?" People were afraid that commitment had ebbed—they were genuinely worried that some of the kinds of things we have recently seen happening around the country would happen at Syracuse.

At this gala in 2014, I told you “Not on my watch.” I reaffirmed this University's commitment to students of color and to the best part of Syracuse University's history of diversity and inclusion. I stand by that commitment today. I stand by the commitment always.

Coming Back Together is all about making connections;

Connecting Back to your alma mater.

Connecting with old friends and colleagues and making new connections.

And, the University for reconnecting with you.

Much has changed since our last CBT. The university is working to strengthen the student experience, every day, every year, until we come back together again.

Let me just say: It's an exciting time to be at Syracuse. A physical transformation of our campus is underway and enhancements to the living and learning environments continue thanks to the forward thinking Campus Framework.

The 20-year roadmap is a living, breathing document that aligns with the University's Academic Strategic Plan and will help us bring to life our vision and mission.

Efforts to accomplish the aspirational and achievable goals as expressed in the Academic Strategic Plan are now supported by a bold and balanced funding plan, known as Invest Syracuse.

The \$100 million initiative aims to provide all students with a distinctive, world-class learning experience that prepares them for professional and personal success.

Those are just a few of the university-wide initiatives that are underway. Each of them, individually and collectively, is making Syracuse University an even better place to live, learn and study for students from all walks of life.

A lot of important work to expand a diverse, inclusive and equitable campus environment has happened since we last gathered together. Many people helped us make great gains. I am particularly grateful to two people who have stepped up, Barry Wells and Bea González.

Barry Wells has returned to Syracuse University as Special Assistant to the Chancellor, and in that capacity has advised me and our leadership team through a broad range of issues related to student life, diversity, and inclusion and student success. He has helped lead our Diversity and Inclusion efforts across campus.

Bea González has become the University's Vice President for Community Engagement and Special Assistant to the Chancellor, and has focused on our community and our students and how to create and energize our partnerships.

Under Barry and Bea's leadership, the Chancellor's Workgroup on Diversity and Inclusion completed its work last year and we are implementing its recommendations. We created a University-wide Council on Diversity and Inclusion as a resource for students, faculty, staff and leadership to enhance diversity and create a more supportive campus climate. Our team is now working to create a new position of Chief Diversity Officer, reporting directly to me. You see, it's not enough to talk about a commitment. I recognize *action* speaks loudest.

In the last three years, with the help of Barry and Bea and so many others, there have been many initiatives to sustain an inclusive culture and expand opportunities for our African American and Latino students.

I want to provide you with five important examples of the University's commitment in action:

- We have strengthened our hiring practices to create more opportunities to increase the number of faculty and staff of color. This fall, we welcomed 90 new full-time faculty. Slightly more than one-quarter of them identify as faculty of color. We have also made key leadership appointments in athletics, public safety, among deans, and in the Chancellor's Council, to ensure that diverse voices are heard at all levels of the university.
- We have worked to improve our campus climate and we have measured our progress. Through the completion of a campus climate survey, we know that the vast majority of our students feel safe and supported by the university. We also know that about a quarter of our students of color have at some point felt excluded or intimidated—and that must change. There is more work to do and it is underway. One result is that we have integrated cultural competency and implicit bias training into our public safety division.
- We have become the No. 1 private university for serving veterans. Our investment in becoming the nation's leading university for veterans is a commitment to diversity and inclusion.
- We have sustained our commitment to community partnerships. We have continue to strengthen the corridor connecting our campus to the Syracuse community, providing experiential learning for our students in urban neighborhoods and serving as a matchmaker to help community-based organizations access university resources

and intellectual capital. The LaCasita Cultural Center in downtown Syracuse has become a recognized stop on that connective corridor.

- We are continuing to create scholarship opportunities for talented students. In terms of grants and investments: our leadership and faculty have recently been awarded about \$4 million from the National Science Foundation to attract and retain more students of color in the STEM fields. And new federal funds from the Department of Education are helping our department of chemistry increase graduate student diversity. Last year, we invested more than \$20 million in our community through regional access scholarships that provide underserved students in central New York access to the extraordinary education here at Syracuse University.

All these efforts are achieving measurable results. Perhaps the most significant progress can be found in terms of our efforts recruiting, retaining and graduating students of color.

- This year's entering undergraduate class is more diverse and has stronger academic qualifications on average than last year.
- The total number of incoming African American and Latino freshmen is up 10% from 2016, increasing from 518 in fall 2016 to 571 in fall 2017. This came after a drop in these numbers in 2016.
- Students of color, which include African American, Latino, Asian American, Native American and students who identify as two or more races, now account for 26 percent of our total undergraduate student population. That's up 2 percent from last year.
- 20 percent of our incoming students are first-generation students, far in excess of most of our peers.

- In line with retaining students, we now offer free tutoring services for all undergraduates to address inequities and to support and retain those students who have come to us with unmet needs.

Not only are we recruiting a more diversely talented group of undergraduate students, we're also retaining them and helping them graduate at even better rates. Our retention rate, which essentially means how many of our first year students are returning for the second year, continues to outpace the national average, including and especially for our African-American and Latino students.

I am especially pleased to report that our six-year graduation rate continues to improve. At most of our peer universities, there is a 15-20 percent gap between students of color and white students. At Syracuse, the gap is now closer to 2%.

These results are important. But we know there is so much more to do.

This brings me to the central purpose of tonight's event—and a continuing goal of this university: to expand scholarship opportunities for students across the socioeconomic spectrum, so that students can enroll here, can thrive here, and can graduate here.

Currently, the Our Time Has Come endowment can only fund scholarships for 20% of the students who are qualified for the award. With your help, we will fund the rest of those promising students who deserve the same opportunities to succeed.

As you know, we recently launched the Invest Syracuse initiative to advance academic excellence and the student experience. As part of that initiative, the Opportunity Syracuse campaign will raise \$40 million over two years to fund scholarships so that talented students can find a place to thrive, right here, regardless of financial means. We have heard clearly

from many of you in this room that students of color need additional scholarship opportunities.

This, friends, is where we need your help.

As we pursue the university's ambitious fundraising goal, generous donors have made it possible to announce tonight a new \$250,000 matching gift for the Our Time Has Come – Invest Syracuse Scholarship. It is our hope that that you will add your generosity to theirs and that we will add \$500,000 scholarship fund to help talented Black and Latino students attend and graduate from Syracuse University.

With the designation of these funds and your gifts – CBT fundraising this year has reached an all-time high of nearly \$950,000.

Congratulations, to all of you who have helped reach this incredible peak. I hope each one of you will consider making a new or additional gift—a gift of opportunity to students of color.

I will close with the words so eloquently delivered by Vernon Jordan at our commencement ceremony this past spring. A heroic civil and human rights leader, he told our graduates: “It is up to you to protect the progress we have made and advance that progress into the future.”

Let's together help our students and our graduates do just that. Let's protect the progress we have made here at Syracuse University, and advance that progress into the future.

Thank you for being here tonight, and I'll hope to see you tomorrow morning at 10:00 am in Hendricks Chapel for what I think is the best gospel choir anywhere, the Black Celestial Choral Ensemble.

Thank you.

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