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Vice President for Commonwealth Campuses and Executive Chancellor
Commencement Address
Penn State Harrisburg
May 5, 2018

Thank you for inviting me to address you today on this very special occasion. Allow me to add my heartfelt congratulations to our graduates for achieving this milestone in life—a major milestone at that.

Graduates, this is your moment and we are all gathered in celebration and in recognition of your good work, your diligence, and perseverance.

Today we are releasing tremendous talent to the region, state, nation and the world. We are conferring approximately 800 academic degrees to very worthy students.

Some of our graduates today have earned dual degrees; a good number are graduating with distinction, have completed the requirements as honors students or Schreyer scholars, and still others have been inducted into their national honor societies for their academic accomplishments. Today's graduating class represents membership in 10 different national honor societies. How remarkable!

Graduates, some of you will enter the world of work and begin your careers upon graduation. Some of you will pursue graduate education to further your credentials- others of you will advance in the companies and organizations where you currently work; start new ventures of your own, educate others, or bravely serve and lead in our armed forces.

And all of you regardless of the path you choose upon graduation will bring exceptional capability, and an entrepreneurial spirit and know-how to the organizations, institutions and ventures you will join or undertake.

Your achievements are a shared victory. Most graduates tell me that they were helped along the way by family and friends, who encouraged them, enabling them to balance the often overwhelming demands of work and family while they pursued their degrees. Our graduates share their success with family members and friends and are grateful for their unwavering support.

Therefore, I ask on behalf of our graduates that the friends, family and loved-ones present here today in honor of our graduates to stand so that we can applaud you in gratitude. Ah, but there are others to thank. Our talented faculty who taught you content, yes, but who inspired and mentored you, who challenged you as learners, who helped you think critically to find your voices and express yourselves, and to aim high and higher still.

The dedicated staff and administrators who assisted you in your journey, supported your learning, directed you to needed resources, and engaged you in co-curricular activities and leadership opportunities. They too share in your achievement, I ask therefore our excellent

faculty, staff and administrators with us today to stand so that our graduates can applaud you in grateful recognition.

Graduates, you have joined the ranks of the higher educated. Your degree is both an honor and a responsibility. The world, the global society looks to its educated for answers and solutions for enhancing the human condition. Society looks to its educated to develop best practices and policies, guided by strong ethics and integrity, to sustain our communities, our businesses and organizations for the people who live and work in them.

I want to share an analogy that I hope will resonate with you as you go forward. The analogy comes from the late Bartlett Giamatti, former president of Yale (and commissioner of major league baseball) dual devotions met in a single lifetime, how very extraordinary he was. I admired him greatly.

Giamatti talked about the university as a “free AND ordered space” -- A “Free AND Ordered space.”

We have order in our traditions and conventions, this commencement proceeding and our academic regalia are prime examples with roots dating back to medieval times and the conferring of degrees, a testimony that each graduate completed successfully a rigorous curriculum, these time honored traditions bring order to the work of the University. There is order to our curriculum processes, our pedagogy, our research and this gives us a sense of who we are as an institution of higher learning as students, educators and scholars.

With order comes extraordinary freedom, freedom to learn and explore ideas. Giamatti encouraged his students (as we do ours) to use this freedom to create new learning, to conduct and translate research to inform practice, to bring to the marketplace invention and new practices, ideas and protocols, and solutions to society’s most pressing problems.

As an educated people we readily experiment, innovate, accept failures on occasions, and we are better able to adapt and adjust to the changing demands of dynamic marketplace, a dynamic world. As a graduate of The Pennsylvania State University, you are prepared to meet future challenges, and I know you will not disappoint. I have just one request of you and that is never lose sight of who you are and where you come from. The distance you have traveled, with its unique twists and turns, your journeys have brought you to this moment and remembering how you have got here will give you a sense of order as you venture out and freely apply your well-earned credential and extraordinary capability.

Many of our students are first generation college students, In fact, over 30 percent of this graduating class represents the first in their families to attend college, and others are the first in their families to earn an advanced degree. I, too, was a first generation college student and the first in my family to go to graduate school to complete a master’s and Ph.D. Education is a great equalizer. No matter your background, education LEVELS the playing field and opens doors for the college educated to enter.

My own story, my journey begins, like many others begin, with family. I could not have succeeded without the help of my family. Going to college, how to apply, what to expect, these were uncharted waters for us. My parents worked extraordinarily hard to give my older sister and me a good life, studying hard in school was my sister's and my job and going to college was an irrefutable expectation.

My grandparents came to this country FROM Minsk, Russia with their four young daughters, my mother the youngest. My grandparents were uneducated; they arrived in America knowing little to no English. I was the youngest in the family and their window into contemporary America. They learned about American life, American youth and American schooling from me and my daily reports of the day. They were my champions giving freely of their unconditional love and support.

After 25 years in this country, my grandfather went to night school. That was a huge undertaking and a bold one for him. He wrote to me in English, his very first essay - it was more of a declaration. It was six short sentences long, but it took him a solid hour to compose. I carried the paper with me until it wore thin and began to shred and then I placed it away for safekeeping. He wrote:

“To Malka (my given name), I am the grandpapa and the family oldest—you are the grandchild and the youngest. Take care of yourself—take care of your family – you are part of us. You make us proud.”

Each letter was carefully crafted in cursive with a cartridge ink pen. I could read every word no matter how it was spelled. He was so proud of this paper when he presented it to me. For him it was a triumph, he was literate in a new language. You don't forget moments like that. I was every bit as proud of him as he was of himself. What courage it took for a father, a grandfather, an immigrant to become a student of English. He was my champion and a hero in my eyes.

My grandmother, Rose, never learned to read or write English but she was a great storyteller and she was an astute businesswomen. My grandparents ran a small grocery store in New York City. Rose was generous with her affection, and in giving advice. On the subject of my future, she was adamant that she told me time and again, to get an education, a college education, be independent, make my own money, and always have some cash hidden away for emergencies - old country ways of thinking I assumed but I listened intently nevertheless.

In fact, it was my grandmother who helped me convert our family den to my own bedroom when at 14. I argued that I was old enough to be released from sharing a room with my older sister. My grandmother was immediately supportive more so than my parents. She argued that I needed a place to work without distraction, I was a good student and the argument won the day and I made the move.

The den actually had a large desk, my former bedroom did not. However, it was my family's only telephone that set on that desk that I coveted. In my generation, telephones were hard-wired and stationary. I spent hours at that desk; I also made quite a few phone calls.

My grandmother unknowingly gave me freedom. She set me on a trajectory that I may not otherwise have known. A place to work to think, to read, to write and create without interruption. It was my window into learning and I seized the opportunity with the greatest of enthusiasm.

I wrote my grandmother letters from college that my mother read to her. I had little time or patience for writing letters but I made an exception when it came to Rose. I wrote weekly. Rose died at the age of ninety. She lived to see me graduate college, marry, start a family and a career.

She had kept my letters in a large photo album that I found after she passed away, also found was a tidy sum of cash. She stuffed many bills, some of them large denominations in the shank of her walker. My mother and I made the find when one of the rubber handgrips came loose. We couldn't imagine how Rose managed that, it had been years since she had done her own banking. Dollars collected over time we supposed in case of an emergency. She took her own advice.

Rose lived in the US for over sixty years, raised her daughters in this country, ran a business with my grandfather, kept the books, and did the banking. She never read or wrote a single word in English. But she was nonetheless eloquent in her advice. She too was my champion and a hero in my eyes.

I wish you all champions to support you and heroes to inspire you. The education you received at Penn State and at this wonderful college has given you the wherewithal to be great champions, and heroes to others in time, each of you has your own inspirational story to share.

I will close by mentioning another great champion of higher learning and an accomplished educator—Dr. Mukund Kulkarni. This commencement ceremony marks the last time that your esteemed Chancellor Mukund Kulkarni will preside over graduation. Dr. Kulkarni is retiring on June 30, after serving Penn State for 33 years. In that time, the college has held 64 commencements, with Dr. Kulkarni presiding over the last 16 of them.

During his tenure, Penn State Harrisburg has experienced substantial growth in its student population, including a record number of international students. During his time as chancellor, more than 11,000 students have graduated. Dr. Kulkarni also oversaw the successful introduction of new degree programs and, the enhancement of academic and student life facilities.

Under Dr. Kulkarni's leadership, Penn State Harrisburg has prospered, securing its standing as a vital regional asset. His many contributions to the college, the University, and the broader region have earned him high regard. It has been a privilege serving the University and this college with him. He is and will always remain my dear friend and colleague. Please join me in recognizing Dr. Kulkarni.

Graduates, I want to remind you that you have joined the ranks of well over 670,000 thousand alumni around the globe. No matter where you go, there is likely to be a fellow Penn Stater nearby. We are all connected, each and every one of us, by this great University.

Congratulations, graduates. Enjoy the day. It is yours to celebrate with friends and family.