

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS: GRADUATE STUDENTS

May 13, 2007

President Adams, Provost Mace, Deans, Administrators, esteemed faculty, family members, friends, and particularly – the graduating class of 2007: greetings! It is indeed a signal honor for me to be here as your speaker on this very special day. Soon-to-be graduates, you have worked extremely hard over several years to arrive at this point of your lives and I want to be among the first to congratulate you for your accomplishments. Though you probably won't remember much of what I say here today, you will never forget these triumphant moments or the occasion because both are truly significant! I can tell you that from experience – for I, too, some forty-five years ago, once sat in the seat that you now occupy.

For a bit of levity - on the morning of August 16th, 1962, when I looked at the printed program for my commencement, I noticed that the academic procession had as its *first* participant, the Sheriff of Clarke County, followed by the Marshall, the President's party, the Deans' party, faculty, candidates for Advanced Degrees and finally candidates for Baccalaureate Degrees! I immediately wondered: why the sheriff? Do they expect trouble? In talking recently to Stephen Brown, Archivist of the Hargrett Library, I learned that this is indeed a long-standing tradition. The Sheriff of Clarke County is *always* at the front of the academic procession carrying a sword. This tradition, from long ago, was instituted to protect commencements from attacks by outsiders. I didn't *know* about this tradition because I'd never attended a UGA commencement before, and was, therefore, nervous throughout the ceremony because I didn't know if any protests or confrontations would be forthcoming with African Americans in the audience and an African American seated as a candidate for degree.

Though I don't remember what Dr. Irvin S. Ingram, the speaker for my commencement said – I do vividly remember the day. Please allow me to reminisce for a few moments. The speaker, Dr. Ingram was President Emeritus of West Georgia College, and I found out later that we both represented “firsts” though at drastically different levels. He was the first president of West Georgia College. I was the first African American to receive a

degree from this university. August 16th 1962 was a gloriously beautiful day. The azure blue sky with lofty white clouds overhead, the caravan of cars driven by family and friends who bravely came to support me on this historic occasion, and the realization that I was on the brink of actually receiving the degree - of achieving my goal, made me extremely happy. And so – I know how you must feel today!

You need to know that 1962 was my second summer at UGA and during my first quarter in residence (the summer of 1961), I had asked if my mother and some friends could attend a choral concert in which I was participating. I was told – no; the university was only integrated for the three African Americans who had been admitted: Charlayne Hunter, Hamilton Holmes, and me. The rationale was that the university could not protect my family and friends. The tenor of the times still indicated a hostile and potentially dangerous environment for African Americans. This commencement on August 16th was, therefore, the first time I had had guests on campus. It was also probably the first time that 74 African Americans had sat in the audience of a commencement at this university. I was so grateful for their support and the encouragement that they had extended over the entire time that I was here. I was particularly grateful to my wonderful mother and my loyal older brother who served as my physical and mental buttress from the very beginning. Their strength and encouragement when times were tough were transmitted to me and gave me the courage to persevere to the point of a degree.

The printed program listed 614 candidates for degrees – both graduate and undergraduate. The event was held in the Fine Arts Auditorium and it was filled to capacity. Five students including me were receiving the Master of Music Education degree, but I only knew, from classes, two of those students. At the conclusion of the ceremony, all graduates were asked to turn in their caps and gowns as they exited the auditorium. A footnote: we were allowed to keep the tassel and I am wearing it today. As a result, I didn't have the opportunity to take an official commencement photo in my cap and gown! A few Polaroid photos without cap and gown were taken by family and friends, of course, and I was surrounded by them in hearty and encouraging congratulations. No one else, students, faculty, or administrators, spoke to me before,

during or after the ceremony or even acknowledged my presence. There were no news media present to my knowledge; but I didn't care at the time because my goal had been attained. I had stayed the course and had received my degree! I knew that an historical event had taken place. I came back to campus a few days later to have a photo taken under The Arches by a photographer from *The Atlanta Inquirer*, a local African American newspaper. The photograph was used with an article entitled: *First Negro Finishes University of Georgia: Graduates With Honors*. Six weeks later, on September 26th, the *Atlanta Journal* published an article entitled: *1st Athens Degree Awarded to Negro*. This was obviously not important news for the Atlanta newspaper.

I returned to campus the summer of 1964 to work toward a Specialist degree because there were still very few African-Americans on campus. I received that degree in 1967. After that time, I heard nothing from the University of Georgia. It was as though I had never attended. In 1997, I was contacted by Dr. Maurice Daniels, then professor in the School of Social Work – now Dean of the School of Social Work. Dr. Daniels was doing research for his outstanding documentary and book: *Foot Soldier for Equal Justice* – the story of Horace T. Ward who was the first African American to apply for admission to UGA in 1950. He was denied. Attorney Donald Hollowell had told Dr. Daniels that I was the first African American graduate of UGA. Dr. Daniels interviewed me, continued his meticulous research and completed his documentary and book. After thirty years of feeling like an invisible alumna as far as UGA was concerned – I had been discovered.

You might wonder – why I am sharing all of this with you. Well, my brief remarks today are centered on the words: ***Roots and Wings***. I will not offer the usual platitudes that are generally offered to graduates. Instead - I have some wishes for you! I wish you graduates: roots and wings: roots so that you never forget where you started, never forget the sacrifices made by family and friends so that you could succeed in your quest for knowledge, and never forget the history of this proud university. According to the dictionary, a root is that organ of a vascular plant that typically lies below the surface of the soil. One of its functions is to anchor the plant body to the ground. Roots, however, need nutrients and water to grow. You also need to nurture your roots, particularly those

that are associated with this university. You can do this by staying connected as active alumni and by being involved in the promotion of UGA. I wish you wings so that you may reach whatever heights to which you aspire. As you move forward from this momentous day, you will need roots to connect you to the past and wings to carry you into the future.

A great deal has changed since my matriculation and commencement 45 years ago! That was the past and you need to know that time and tremendous efforts by many people here (the intrepid President Adams; Dr. Daniels mentioned earlier; the College of Education under Dean Castenell; the Graduate School under Dean Grasso; the wonderful and visionary GAPS organization and others too numerous to name)- to heal old hurts have completely changed my outlook on this university. I now feel a part of UGA and I am happy to count myself among the many thousand active alumni. The history or roots of that past, however, are not forgotten because they connect all of us to a sense of identity of who we are and how very far we have come. I realize that some students feel that we have not progressed enough and with that I would agree. Our university, founded in 1785 as the first state-chartered university in the nation, still has a “ways to go” if it is to reflect the whole of Georgia and continue to serve as a model for the nation. As I look out on this audience, however, I cannot but feel very proud because we have advanced both in terms of diversity of students, faculty, administrators and audience members. This was not true when I attended. The first African-American full professor appointed by our institution was Dr. Richard Graham in the School of Music in 1968. He later became the Director of the School of Music in 1997. The university has made progress – however slowly it came. There are miles to go before we sleep – but we’re moving in the right direction and with your assistance, we will ultimately reach the goal that we all seek. Many of the buildings and dormitories, equipped with the latest technology and materials were not here in 1962. The library has been expanded and what a treasure trove of resources it offers to students and faculty alike! It is no longer just books, though four million of those are housed there, it is also digital. Student enrollment when I was here topped out at 7,100 – today, it is closer to 34,000. I could go on and on with an honor roll of true progress, but I won’t. The point that I am trying to make is that your roots are

grounded in excellence, and your academic prowess has helped to nurture that success. Now as you go forward with newly-minted degrees, you have the opportunity and the obligation to make this university soar in its greatness!

I wish for all of you wings so that you can fly as high as your potential allows. In whatever your job or career path, I hope that you will make your flight reflect a love and respect for all people – white, black, brown, and yellow because if we don't unite and work together to make good things happen at UGA and in our world – nothing else will matter. I think that it was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said that, in music, it takes the black keys as well as the white keys to make harmony. There are several songs about rainbows – the whole spectrum of color: *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*, *I Can Sing A Rainbow*, but the song, *Rainbow Connection*, written by Paul Williams and sung by Kermit the Frog (Jim Henson) says it best in these lyrics: *Why are there so many songs about rainbows And what's on the other side? Rainbows are visions, but only illusions, And rainbows have nothing to hide. So we've been told and some choose to believe it. I know they're wrong, wait and see. Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection, The lovers, the dreamers and me. Who said that every wish would be heard and answered when wished on the morning star? Somebody thought of that and someone believed it, and look what it's done so far. What's so amazing that keeps us stargazing? And what do we think we might see? Someday we'll find it, the rainbow connection, UGA, you graduates, and me. A bit of editorial license!*

Wherever your path leads, never lose sight of the humanity of others; never be guilty of ostracism or alienation because education is not simply about achieving academically as you have done. Education also embraces the understanding and the acceptance of, and respect for all people. Those qualities represent the conduit to peace in our world. That, after all, *is* the rainbow connection!

Graduates, you can find that “rainbow connection” wherever you go; you can change the world and the University of Georgia to what they should and can be. Congratulations and don't forget to nurture your roots and soar with your wings! Thank you!