

City College Commencement
New York, New York
June 2, 1999

**PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION**

**City College of New York Commencement
Address by First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton**

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Thank you very much, President Moses. I am deeply honored by this recognition from this college, and I am honored to join all of you on behalf of City College's 1999 graduating class—the very last class in this century and the very first to shape the next century.

You know, as I look out at this great crowd of students and faculty, I can't help but remember that it was 30 years ago that I graduated from college. And when I think back on those days and the challenges that we faced, I can see in my mind's eye the way generations respond to whatever it is that is challenging each of us at the time we enter into the world after we finish our education. Just as my parents and those people who are here that were of my parents' generation would talk about the Depression or World War II, my husband and I talk about the dreams of the Civil Rights Movement, the space program, the Peace Corps. We remember the tragedies of the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Bobby Kennedy. We wonder about the ongoing lessons from a divisive war, and the deadly mixture of poverty, racism, and despair that burst our cities into flames.

And today, looking back 30 years, or looking back to my parents' generation, we can say that much has changed—and much has changed for the better in America. You will be able to tell a different story. Those of you who are already parents or even grandparents in this class, as well as those of you who have not yet started families or have other ideas in mind about your own futures, you'll be able to talk about the technological advances that allow you to be interconnected across the world with just a click of a mouse. You'll be able to marvel at the revolution in biology that is finally allowing us to confront some of our biggest killers. And you will be able personally to attest to the importance of opening the doors of education and employment for all Americans. But we have many challenges, just as every generation has faced. We do have to confront those challenges because while change is certain, progress is not. And what we call the American Dream is really a compact between generations.

We believe in America that we can—through hard work and the acceptance of responsibility and the offering of opportunity—we can move closer to our stated ideals. We can, in fact, move closer to realizing the ideals and values on which this college was based.

If we think back 152 years, we can imagine the dreams of those who came together to found this school. They understood clearly that in America, if the doors of education were not available, if people did not believe they could make progress for themselves and their children, then the whole idea of America would not survive. So imagine that first class 150 years ago. There were only 143 students, and the president of

what was then called The Free Academy, Dr. Horace Webster, told those students, "The experiment is to be tried whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated."

Well, I think that you have proven that that dream, and really that hope that was held by those founders, has been realized. But we have to continue to push forward to make sure that it always is. When people want to know whether that dream is being fulfilled, when they want to know whether the children of the whole people are being educated, I would want them to look at this class to see what happens when students are blessed with opportunity, when they are inspired by dedication, when they accept responsibility, and when the larger community invests in their hopes and dreams.

I hope they will think about a student like Jorge Becerra, whose family fled Cuba in his junior year of high school. During college, he helped translate for Spanish-speaking patients at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, and today he is graduating with a Bachelor of Science degree in biology as this year's salutatorian. I hope they will think about Shenez Carmichael, who was accepted into City College through the Seek Program. She could not have afforded college were it not for this college. She worked 30 hours a week to pay her tuition and other expenses, and today she is graduating with a 3.95 GPA and a 4.0 in her history major.

I hope that people will also think about Guadalupe Bermeo. She came to this country from Ecuador 13 years ago. And when her last child was ready to go to school, she thought, "Well, what about me?" She overcame a lack of English skills. She overcame nursing a child with cerebral palsy. She overcame her own health problems that kept her out of school for a year. And today she will graduate with a degree in chemical engineering and, at the young age of 50, begin a new life.

Now all of us know that each of us is here—from those of us on the platform to those of you graduating—each of us is here because of the contributions that others have made to enable us to be here. And I want to thank, on behalf of this class and on behalf of all of us who care about education, the family members who supported you with endless patience, the teachers and faculty whose ears and offices were open and who never gave up, and the alumni and other supporters of City College who have never given up on you or this institution. Let's give them all a round of applause.

When you walk around this campus today, especially during Club Hours, you can see the children of the whole people. More than half of the members of this class were born in other countries, from places as far away as Egypt and Japan, Israel and Poland, Nigeria and the Dominican Republic. What an example this college and this class is to people all over the world who need to understand and see for themselves how much better it is when we work and learn together to build a common future.

You know, the story of City College is really the story of New York and the story of America. It is the story of waves of immigrants who came here from different lands, many escaping hardship and oppression, all yearning to breathe free.

Fifty years ago, E.B. White said of New York, "The city is like poetry; it compresses all life, all races and breeds into a small island and adds music and the accompaniment of internal engines." Well, you've had a lot of engines moving you forward because you would not be here had you not seized the opportunity, accepted the responsibility, and become part of this community.

Now we have to look back and think of all those who came before, graduates of this institution who shaped America. What would America be without the legal mind of Felix Frankfurter? Or the music of Ira Gershwin? Or the leadership of Colin Powell? Or the guidance of Stanley Kaplan, who tutored countless students when he attended City College, and has helped so many young people make it through their entrance exams, and just celebrated his 60th reunion? He is here today. And on behalf of all the caring alumni, let us thank Mr. Kaplan.

And yet as we gather today, we know we cannot just celebrate. We have to think about what comes next. We have to be willing to accept the challenges of this time. I'm very impressed with a story I just learned about one of the distinguished graduates of City College, Jonas Salk, who discovered a vaccine for polio which saved generations of children from that cruel fate. When they offered him a ticker-tape parade in 1955, he asked that they use the money instead for scholarships. I'm sure that he would be very proud of all those students who have received the Jonas E. Salk Scholarship for Medical Education. And I know he'd be proud of Patricia Burns, who moved to New York and began working at restaurants and at other various jobs and continued to volunteer in hospitals, keeping the dream of medicine in the back of her mind. Then when she lost a close friend to AIDS, she knew she did not want his death to be in vain, so she decided to pursue her dream. She will graduate today as the valedictorian and will go on to medical school along with so many other graduates of City College.

Now some of you may be wondering, "Well what does this have to do with me? Isn't it enough that I got my own degree, that I had to work to put myself through school, that I had to continue perhaps to raise my family?" As I was walking in, one of the graduates held up a sign which said, "It takes a village." And I know that for all of you, it's taken a village to get you here. But when you take your oath to this city later, you're going to be promising to do what you can to make this city, and by extension this state and country, a better place than the place you found.

Let me just read from what you will be saying. You will be saying, "We will strive unceasingly to quicken the public's sense of civic duty and thus, in all these ways, we will strive to transmit this city not only not less, but greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us."

Now there are many ways to put that oath into action, but one of the most important is to be part of the transformation of public education that will enable this city, this state, and this country to continue to offer opportunities for all people to come. We know that in today's global, information-based economy, higher education is often the

fault-line between those who will make it and those who will be left behind. That is why this Administration, under the President's leadership, has fought so hard to open the doors of college to all those willing to work for that opportunity—to use Pell and Hope Scholarships and Lifetime Learning Credits to make the 13th and 14th years of school as universal as the first 12. And we know that in order to make good on that promise, our public schools and our public colleges must be able to perform at the highest possible standards.

One of the most important questions facing this university and public schools across the country is this: How do we make sure that all students, all teachers, all schools meet those high standards? How do we ensure that students receive the education that will lift them as far as their aspirations and ambitions will take them? How do we make sure that we fulfill the vision of making it possible that any student, regardless of where you came from, can walk out of this and other public colleges with an education that prepares you for the challenges of the new global economy?

No one wins, especially our children, if our schools are plagued by poor test scores and performance, by low expectations and social promotion. No one wins, especially our children, if politics takes up much-needed seats in the classroom. We have to be willing to demand high standards and accountability, but we have to pursue strategies that work, that actually lift up the performance of students, enabling all schools to do better, not just score political points. We can never lift up our public schools or the students they serve by tearing them down. We can never ensure the economic future of this city or state, or our nation, by undermining the public education system that is at the very foundation of the American Dream. And we can never succeed in educating the children of the whole people if we breach the promise of affordable, quality public education. But the fact is that we have to fulfill that promise long before a student reaches this college. Even long before that student enters high school, or junior high school, there is enough responsibility to transform our public education system to go around to all of us.

Let me just list a few of the ways each of us can help fulfill the promise of quality, public education. We can fulfill it by convincing parents that they are their child's first teachers. And where parents may not understand that, or they themselves do not have much education to even grasp that concept, let us try to help parents be the best parents they can be to give their children the best start in life. We can help fulfill that promise by investing in the early, critical years when a child's brain is literally being formed for future education. My husband said in a State of the Union address that education begins at the age of zero. It is time we began to take that seriously. That means we need to invest in more early childhood development programs, pre-school programs, Head-Start programs. It means we need to provide for the children of the whole people what those of us able to afford for our own children give to those children—the kind of enriching experiences that prepare them for school. It means we need to lower classroom size and put more qualified teachers in them.

When I was a principal for a day, which meant that I followed a real principal around for a day, I was in a school in Queens—a junior high school that was built for 1,500 students but had 2,000 students and was putting in mobile classrooms for 500 more. Now that is no way to value education and give children the attention they need to learn. We have to rebuild and modernize crumbling schools, we have to build new schools where they are needed, and we have to turn failing schools around. No parent—*no* parent—should have to send any child to a failing public school. That should be a solemn promise we make.

And we know so much more about how to make schools succeed, but we also know it takes some time. We did not get into this situation over night. We have disinvested in public schools in too many places. We have not given the support that teachers and parents and principals need, but we cannot excuse poor performance. We need to hold everybody accountable and provide the best possible education. One of those strategies that will work is providing more charter schools and public school choice. It will also work to give more young people the kind of mentoring and extra assistance they need to get ready for college as you do here with the Gear-Up Program.

We also have to keep our schools free from violence. We have to identify young people who are troubled and get them help before it is too late.

I hope you will think about the gifts that your education now gives you that you can transmit; gifts not only as workers, but also as parents and as citizens. There is much work to be done to pass on our guarantee of freedom and opportunity for all. To pass on the dual mission of this institution: access and excellence. To pass on a belief in public service just as many of you have done by volunteering at local schools and hospitals, what you have done with the unprecedented Crosstown 116 Project, how you are transforming this city. You can pass on those gifts and a commitment that you too will do your part to keep faith with the American Dream.

You've had many distinguished alumni. Each has left this institution at a different time with a different set of experiences, and each has had to take their own gifts into the future. Think of them not just as what you can do for yourselves, but think about what you can do for everyone else as well. There are countless young people in this city who are not here in an institution of higher education; who somewhere along the line were discouraged, were put down, were sent the wrong messages, didn't get the kind of support that it does take a village and a strong family to provide. Each of you can reach out in your own ways to the young people of this city, to lift them up and point them forward.

We've made a lot of progress in America in the last six-and-a-half years. It's not only the booming economy that is really beginning to transform every level of society, because it's not just those at the top who are doing well. For the first time we are seeing wage gains and income increases all the way down the ladder of opportunity, and for the first time we have turned around the much too prevalent unemployment of poor people—African-American males and others who are finally sharing in the prosperity that we now

enjoy. But it is not just economics that I would ask you to address. We've also done some good work in many of our social problems. Teenage pregnancy is down; crime is down; people are once again more focused on making their neighborhoods work and turning inward to ask themselves what they can do to make a contribution to a stronger community.

In the last few weeks I have been in two very different places. I went to Macedonia to see the Kosovar refugees. I visited them in their tents. I talked with them and heard their stories of atrocities and brutality and oppression. And I was also in Littleton, Colo., right here in the United States, where I talked with the family members of those who lost loved ones in that terrible tragedy. Now one would think there's nothing really in common between those two places and those groups of people, but I could not get out of my mind their stories. Each of them have lost so much because of hatred and violence, because of people who wanted to push down and oppress somebody else in order to lift themselves up, because the problems that fester that were not identified, treated, and hopefully solved.

Here we are at the end of this bloody century where so much has been lost and yet so much progress has been made alongside the horrors that have been inflicted—ending this century in Europe with yet another bloody conflict caused by forces of oppression and bigotry, discrimination and evil. And each of us must make a stand in our own minds and, I would argue and suggest, also a stand in the public arena as well for the kind of society we want here at home and around the world. There is no doubt that if we educate people and prepare them to take their places, they cannot just be part of the economic engine if our society and culture are to provide the support for what we most value.

So as you go forth in this graduating class, you bear not only the hopes and dreams of all those who helped you get here, but you also are carrying the aspirations of those who came before, and you will help determine who comes after. I congratulate you, for many of you have overcome incredible obstacles to make it here. And I wish you the very best as you go forward. And I ask you do not turn your back on those who will need your example and the gifts you have cultivated, because we all hope to leave not only this city but our nation better than what we found.

God bless you and Godspeed, Class of 1999!