*Commencement address delivered by Michelle Obama, City College of New York (2016)*

Wow! (Applause.) Let me just take it in. First of all, it is beyond a pleasure and an honor to be here to celebrate the City College of New York Class of 2016! You all, I mean, this has been the most fun I think I’ve had at a commencement ever. (Applause.)

Let me just say a few thank yous. Let me start, of course, by thanking President Coico for that wonderful introduction, for her leadership here at City College, for this honorary degree.

I also want to recognize Senator Schumer, Chancellor Milliken, Trustee Shorter, Edward Plotkin, as well as your amazing valedictorian, Antonios Mourdoukoutas -- did I get it right? (Applause.) And your amazing salutatorian, Orubba Almansouri. (Applause.) I really don’t want to follow those two. (Laughter.) If anybody is wondering about the quality of education, just listening to those two speakers lets you know what’s happening here. And I’m so proud of you both -- and to your families, congratulations. Well done. Well done. (Applause.)

And of course, let us not forget Elizabeth Aklilu for her amazing performance of the National Anthem earlier today. She blew it out of the water. (Applause.)

But most of all, I want to acknowledge all of you -– the brilliant, talented, ambitious, accomplished, and all-around outstanding members of the class of 2016! Woo! (Applause.) You give me chills. You all have worked so hard and come so far to reach this milestone, so I know this is a big day for all of you and your families, and for everyone at this school who supported you on this journey.

And in many ways, this is a big day for me too. See, this is my very last commencement address as First Lady of the United States. This is it. (Applause.) So I just want to take it all in. And I think this was the perfect place to be, because this is my last chance to share my love and admiration, and hopefully a little bit of wisdom with a graduating class.

And, graduates, I really want you all to know that there is a reason why, of all of the colleges and universities in this country, I chose this particular school in this particular city for this special moment. (Applause.) And I’m here because of all of you. I mean, we’ve talked about it -- Antonios, I’m going to talk a little bit about diversity, thank you. (Laughter.)

Just look around. Look at who you are. Look at where we’re gathered today. As the President eloquently said, at this school, you represent more than 150 nationalities. You speak more than 100 different languages -- whoa, just stop there. You represent just about every possible background -– every color and culture, every faith and walk of life. And you’ve taken so many different paths to this moment.

Maybe your family has been in this city for generations, or maybe, like my family, they came to this country centuries ago in chains. Maybe they just arrived here recently, determined to give you a better life.

But, graduates, no matter where your journey started, you have all made it here today through the same combination of unyielding determination, sacrifice, and a whole lot of hard work -– commuting hours each day to class, some of you. (Applause.) Yes, amen. (Laughter.) Juggling multiple jobs to support your families and pay your tuition. (Applause.) Studying late into the night, early in the morning; on subways and buses, and in those few precious minutes during breaks at work.

And somehow, you still found time to give back to your communities –- tutoring young people, reading to kids, volunteering at hospitals. Somehow, you still managed to do prestigious internships and research fellowships, and join all kinds of clubs and activities. And here at this nationally-ranked university, with a rigorous curriculum and renowned faculty, you rose to the challenge, distinguishing yourselves in your classes, winning countless honors and awards, and getting into top graduate schools across this country. Whoa. (Laughter.)

So, graduates, with your glorious diversity, with your remarkable accomplishments and your deep commitment to your communities, you all embody the very purpose of this school’s founding. And, more importantly, you embody the very hopes and dreams carved into the base of that iconic statue not so far from where we sit -- on that island where so many of your predecessors at this school first set foot on our shores.

And that is why I wanted to be here today at City College. I wanted to be here to celebrate all of you, this school, this city. (Applause.) Because I know that there is no better way to celebrate this great country than being here with you.

See, all of you know, for centuries, this city has been the gateway to America for so many striving, hope-filled immigrants -- folks who left behind everything they knew to seek out this land of opportunity that they dreamed of. And so many of those folks, for them, this school was the gateway to actually realizing that opportunity in their lives, founded on the fundamental truth that talent and ambition know no distinctions of race, nationality, wealth, or fame, and dedicated to the ideals that our Founding Fathers put forth more than two centuries ago: That we are all created equal, all entitled to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” City College became a haven for brilliant, motivated students of every background, a place where they didn’t have to hide their last names or their accents, or put on any kind of airs because the students at this school were selected based not on pedigree, but on merit, and merit alone. (Applause.)

So really, it is no accident that this institution has produced 10 Nobel Prize winners -- (applause) -- along with countless captains of industry, cultural icons, leaders at the highest levels of government. Because talent and effort combined with our various backgrounds and life experiences has always been the lifeblood of our singular American genius.

Just take the example of the great American lyricist, Ira Gershwin, who attended City College a century ago. The son of a Russian-Jewish immigrant, his songs still light up Broadway today. Or consider the story of the former CEO of Intel, Andrew Grove, class of 1960. (Applause.) He was a Hungarian immigrant whose harrowing escape from Nazism and communism shaped both his talent for business and his commitment to philanthropy.

And just think about the students in this very graduating class –- students like the economics and pre-law major from Albania, who also completed the requirements for a philosophy major and dreams of being a public intellectual. The educational theater student from right here in Harlem who’s already an award-winning playwright and recently spoke at the White House. The biomedical science major who was born in Afghanistan and plans to be a doctor, a policy maker and an educator. (Applause.) And your salutatorian, whose Yemeni roots inspired her to study Yemini women’s writing and to advocate for girls in her community, urging them to find their own voices, to tell their own stories. I could go on.

These are just four of the nearly 4,000 unique and amazing stories in this graduating class –- stories that have converged here at City College, this dynamic, inclusive place where you all have had the chance to really get to know each other, to listen to each other’s languages, to enjoy each other’s food -- lasagna, obviously -- (laughter) -- music, and holidays. Debating each other’s ideas, pushing each other to question old assumptions and consider new perspectives.

And those interactions have been such a critical part of your education at this school. Those moments when your classmates showed you that your stubborn opinion wasn’t all that well-informed -- mmm hmm. (Laughter.) Or when they opened your eyes to an injustice you never knew existed. Or when they helped you with a question that you couldn’t have possibly answered on your own.

I think your valedictorian put it best -- and this is a quote -- he said, “The sole irreplaceable component of my CCNY experience came from learning alongside people with life experiences strikingly different from my own.” He said, “I have learned that diversity in human experience gives rise to diversity in thought, which creates distinct ideas and methods of problem solving.” That was an okay quote. (Laughter and applause.) Okay, you’re bright. (Laughter.) I couldn’t have said it better myself.

That is the power of our differences to make us smarter and more creative. And that is how all those infusions of new cultures and ideas, generation after generation, created the matchless alchemy of our melting pot and helped us build the strongest, most vibrant, most prosperous nation on the planet, right here. (Applause.)

But unfortunately, graduates, despite the lessons of our history and the truth of your experience here at City College, some folks out there today seem to have a very different perspective. They seem to view our diversity as a threat to be contained rather than as a resource to be tapped. They tell us to be afraid of those who are different, to be suspicious of those with whom we disagree. They act as if name-calling is an acceptable substitute for thoughtful debate, as if anger and intolerance should be our default state rather than the optimism and openness that have always been the engine of our progress.

But, graduates, I can tell you, as First Lady, I have had the privilege of traveling around the world and visiting dozens of different countries, and I have seen what happens when ideas like these take hold. I have seen how leaders who rule by intimidation –- leaders who demonize and dehumanize entire groups of people –- often do so because they have nothing else to offer. And I have seen how places that stifle the voices and dismiss the potential of their citizens are diminished; how they are less vital, less hopeful, less free.

Graduates, that is not who we are. That is not what this country stands for. (Applause.) No, here in America, we don’t let our differences tear us apart. Not here. Because we know that our greatness comes when we appreciate each other’s strengths, when we learn from each other, when we lean on each other. Because in this country, it’s never been each person for themselves. No, we’re all in this together. We always have been.

And here in America, we don’t give in to our fears. We don’t build up walls to keep people out because we know that our greatness has always depended on contributions from people who were born elsewhere but sought out this country and made it their home -– from innovations like Google and eBay to inventions like the artificial heart, the telephone, even the blue jeans; to beloved patriotic songs like “God Bless America,” like national landmarks like the Brooklyn Bridge and, yes, the White House -– both of which were designed by architects who were immigrants. (Applause.)

Finally, graduates, our greatness has never, ever come from sitting back and feeling entitled to what we have. It’s never come from folks who climb the ladder of success, or who happen to be born near the top and then pull that ladder up after themselves. No, our greatness has always come from people who expect nothing and take nothing for granted -- folks who work hard for what they have then reach back and help others after them.

That is your story, graduates, and that is the story of your families. (Applause.) And it’s the story of my family, too. As many of you know, I grew up in a working class family in Chicago. And while neither of my parents went past high school, let me tell you, they saved up every penny that my dad earned at his city job because they were determined to send me to college.

And even after my father was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis and he struggled to walk, relying on crutches just to get himself out of bed each morning, my father hardly ever missed a day of work. See, that blue-collar job helped to pay the small portion of my college tuition that wasn’t covered by loans or grants or my work-study or my summer jobs. And my dad was so proud to pay that tuition bill on time each month, even taking out loans when he fell short. See, he never wanted me to miss a registration deadline because his check was late. That’s my story.

And, graduates, you all have faced challenges far greater than anything I or my family have ever experienced, challenges that most college students could never even imagine. Some of you have been homeless. Some of you have risked the rejection of your families to pursue your education. Many of you have lain awake at night wondering how on Earth you were going to support your parents and your kids and still pay tuition. And many of you know what it’s like to live not just month to month or day to day, but meal to meal.

But, graduates, let me tell you, you should never, ever be embarrassed by those struggles. You should never view your challenges as a disadvantage. Instead, it’s important for you to understand that your experience facing and overcoming adversity is actually one of your biggest advantages. And I know that because I’ve seen it myself, not just as a student working my way through school, but years later when I became -- before I came to the White House and I worked as a dean at a college.

In that role, I encountered students who had every advantage –- their parents paid their full tuition, they lived in beautiful campus dorms. They had every material possession a college kid could want –- cars, computers, spending money. But when some of them got their first bad grade, they just fell apart. They lost it, because they were ill-equipped to handle their first encounter with disappointment or falling short.

But, graduates, as you all know, life will put many obstacles in your path that are far worse than a bad grade. You’ll have unreasonable bosses and difficult clients and patients. You’ll experience illnesses and losses, crises and setbacks that will come out of nowhere and knock you off your feet. But unlike so many other young people, you have already developed the resilience and the maturity that you need to pick yourself up and dust yourself off and keep moving through the pain, keep moving forward. You have developed that muscle. (Applause.)

And with the education you’ve gotten at this fine school, and the experiences you’ve had in your lives, let me tell you, nothing -– and I mean nothing -– is going to stop you from fulfilling your dreams. And you deserve every last one of the successes that I know you will have.

But I also want to be very clear that with those successes comes a set of obligations –- to share the lessons you’ve learned here at this school. The obligation to use the opportunities you’ve had to help others. That means raising your hand when you get a seat in that board meeting and asking the question, well, whose voices aren’t being heard here? What ideas are we missing? It means adding your voice to our national conversation, speaking out for our most cherished values of liberty, opportunity, inclusion, and respect –- the values that you’ve been living here at this school.

It means reaching back to help young people who’ve been left out and left behind, helping them prepare for college, helping them pay for college, making sure that great public universities like this one have the funding and support that they need. (Applause.) Because we all know that public universities have always been one of the greatest drivers of our prosperity, lifting countless people into the middle class, creating jobs and wealth all across this nation.

Public education is our greatest pathway to opportunity in America. So we need to invest in and strengthen our public universities today, and for generations to come. (Applause.) That is how you will do your part to live up to the oath that you all will take here today –- the oath taken by generations of graduates before you to make your city and your world “greater, better, and more beautiful.”

More than anything else, graduates, that is the American story. It’s your story and the story of those who came before you at this school. It’s the story of the son of Polish immigrants named Jonas Salk who toiled for years in a lab until he discovered a vaccine that saved countless lives. It’s the story of the son of immigrant -- Jamaican immigrants named Colin Powell who became a four star general, Secretary of State, and a role model for young people across the country.

And, graduates, it’s the story that I witness every single day when I wake up in a house that was built by slaves, and I watch my daughters –- two beautiful, black young women -– head off to school -- (applause) -- waving goodbye to their father, the President of the United States, the son of a man from Kenya who came here to American -- to America for the same reasons as many of you: To get an education and improve his prospects in life.

So, graduates, while I think it’s fair to say that our Founding Fathers never could have imagined this day, all of you are very much the fruits of their vision. Their legacy is very much your legacy and your inheritance. And don’t let anybody tell you differently. You are the living, breathing proof that the American Dream endures in our time. It’s you.

So I want you all to go out there. Be great. Build great lives for yourselves. Enjoy the liberties that you have in this great country. Pursue your own version of happiness. And please, please, always, always do your part to help others do the same.

I love you all. I am so proud of you. (Applause.) Thank you for allowing me to share this final commencement with you. I have so much faith in who you will be. Just keep working hard and keep the faith. I can’t wait to see what you all achieve in the years ahead.

Thank you all. God bless. Good luck on the road ahead. (Applause.)