



U.S. Department of Education

## **The Ladder Beneath My Feet**

**The Convocation Oration of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan  
at the Commencement of Howard University**

MAY 12, 2012

I feel very fortunate to be here today to share in something which I think we do too little of in the field of education—and that is to celebrate success. To our graduates, and to their families who have supported them on this journey, congratulations.

Although I am so pleased to be here today, this occasion is a humbling one too. I know the rich history here--and we need Howard, and all HBCUs, not just to survive but to thrive as we move forward.

For the past 145 years—ever since Howard University was created by an act of Congress signed by President Andrew Johnson himself—Howard, and its proud graduates and its star faculty, have been a barometer on the state of the American Dream.

In 1965, President Lyndon Johnson gave a famous commencement speech here at Howard where he said that the “graduating class at Howard University is witness to the indomitable determination of the [black] American to win his way in American life.”

Every American, he said, should be able to become whatever their “qualities of mind and spirit would permit—to strive, to seek, and to find happiness. This is American justice.”

Sixteen years later, Ronald Reagan’s vice-president, George H.W. Bush, stood on this commencement stage. He called Howard a “crucible for ideas and social action.”

Jump forward 17 years to 1998, and my colleague and friend, Hillary Clinton was the commencement speaker and the First Lady. She said that it was “impossible for anyone to come to this campus . . . and not feel the richness of Howard’s tradition . . . and a reverence for those who paved the way for tomorrow’s leaders.”

So I stand here today in the shadows of giants. I stand here fully aware that Howard has been, yes, a crucible for social action and a proving ground for American justice.

And I am humbled to be sharing the stage with such a distinguished group of honorary degree recipients. Chris Mathews, and my good friends John Legend and Julieanna Richardson, are all ground-breakers in their professions. They are passionate believers in equal opportunity and the power of a great education.

And Isabel Wilkerson, a Howard alumnus who had a storied career with the *New York Times*, is the first black woman in the history of American journalism to win a Pulitzer Prize. *The Warmth of Other Suns*, her epic history of the black migration, is without parallel.

That's mighty impressive company. But to the honorary degree recipients, I just want to say—please, don't let it go to your head.

Previous honorary degree recipients at Howard include Frederick Douglass, Marian Anderson, Eleanor Roosevelt, James Baldwin, and Desmond Tutu.

In 1957, two of my heroes, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jackie Robinson, were both honorary degree recipients. Can you imagine that extraordinary occasion?

I know that it may seem hard for today's graduates to envision their peers 15 to 20 years from now. When I graduated, it never occurred to me that I might one day serve as the Secretary of Education. I had what I thought was a more sensible plan. I was going to play in the NBA. Clearly, that didn't work out!

But if you look to your left and your right today, if you look in front and behind you, you will see America's future leaders.

Few universities can claim as many firsts as Howard. Toni Morrison, a Howard graduate and former member of the faculty, was the first black woman to receive both the Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize in literature.

Your university Provost, Dr. Lasalle Leffall, is the first African-American president of the American College of Surgeons and the American Cancer Society.

Other Howard graduates were the first African-Americans to be elected to the U.S. Senate, a U.S. governor, mayor of New York City, and U.N. Ambassador.

And last, but certainly not least, the mighty Thurgood Marshall, the first African-American Supreme Court Justice, was in Howard's Law School first graduating class.

I have said repeatedly that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And few can testify to that truth more powerfully than the founders of Howard and their successors here today.

There is a reason, as President Obama says, "that the story of the civil rights movement was written in our schools." That reason is known to everyone here today. Education is the great equalizer in America.

It doesn't matter what your race, income, or zip code is—every child is entitled to a quality education. And this fight is about so much more than educational opportunity—it is a fight for social justice. As Lyndon Johnson said at Howard many years ago, this is a fight for "American justice."

Howard's leaders and students have always understood this. No institution has done more to tear down the barriers of segregation.

When Howard Law School opened, its faculty created a course to train law students in how to challenge Jim Crow laws in court.

Soon after leaving Howard, Thurgood Marshall became the NAACP's chief counsel. And nine of the ten NAACP lawyers who worked on the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case under Marshall were Howard Law graduates. Marshall argued the case before the Supreme Court and won—and changed the course of American history forever.

When I was the CEO of the Chicago Public Schools, I loved sending our students to Howard. I knew they would get a great education, and be cared for in a community that nurtured leadership, commitment, and compassion.

One of my students was De'Rell Bonner, who served on my student advisory council. He and his peers told me the truth—what I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear. And in doing so, they made the system better.

In Chicago, De'Rell helped organize a rally to improve Chicago's public schools and addressed a crowd of more than 25,000 people. In Washington, and at Howard, De'Rell continues to treat democracy as a verb. He knows that protecting our democracy requires action, not just admiring.

Like many of you, De'Rell is the first in his family to go to college. He came to Howard and to Washington right around the same time that I did.

Both the President and I are hoping to stay on in DC for four more years. And I hope De'Rell considers sticking around as well. In fact, he'll be interning with me this summer.

I have confidence in De'Rell, and in all of you, because you don't get through Howard without hard work—and without overcoming challenges.

You had to overcome Bison-web and override slips. You survived the Snowmageddon blizzard of 2010. After 14 years of waiting, the football team beat Hampton. And Morehouse. The Lady Bison went all the way to the final of the MEAC basketball tournament this year.

One campus acappella group, Afro-Blue, made it all the way to the finals of "The Sing Off."

But Afro-Blue is so much more than a group of amazing voices with sophisticated arrangements; they combine excellence with commitment. As Howard ambassadors, they also sang vocal jazz to raise money to alleviate famine and malnutrition in Somalia.

At Howard, Afro-Blue's commitment to social justice is widely shared. Nearly 400 Howard students volunteered in the alternative spring break program in five cities this year. You raised over \$80,000 to support service in five communities. You slept on the floors of churches and shelters to tackle the tough issues, like devastating gun violence in my hometown of Chicago and devastating illiteracy in Detroit.

Howard students have a long history of doing what they think is right--and not just what they are told. You insist on fighting inequity—from creating the viral video campaign "Am I Suspicious" to counteract the racial profiling of Trayvon Martin in his hoodie, to challenging campus policies.

Now, when I give commencement speeches, I know that I am really speaking to two audiences. The graduates want a short speech so they can get to celebrating.

But your parents, your aunts, uncles, and grandparents, and your professors, they're not in such a rush. They say, "Unh-unh. Not so fast, Mr. Secretary. I've been waiting a long time for this day. We bought this lunch. Take your time."

And since tomorrow is Mother's day, I'm going to listen to the mothers and aunts and grandmas in the audience and just talk for a few more minutes here.

Seeing your child in a cap and gown, earning a Howard degree—that's about the best Mother's Day gift I can imagine.

If I can leave you with two messages today, the first would be to pursue your passion in the years ahead. Experience the life-altering opportunity to find what you love--and stick with it, even if it may take you down some unexpected or unconventional paths.

The second piece of advice that I would pass on is to continue the powerful Howard tradition of giving something back, of paying it forward. When Marian Wright Edelman gave the Howard commencement in 1990, she said that "service is the rent each of us pays for living."

Your goal in life can't just be to do well for yourself. I love Howard's motto, "Truth and Service." Not "Truth *or* Service." Truth *and* Service. As Dr. King said, "Everybody can be great, because anybody can serve."

I know that giving back is easier to preach than practice. Many of you have student loans to pay off. And you're concerned about the tough job market. It's hard to take a more rewarding job that pays less, or to think about giving back, when you have loans to pay back.

But despite those very real challenges, life will ultimately be richer and more rewarding if you pursue a passion in your career. Believe in your talent and you can accomplish the unexpected.

Billionaire investor Warren Buffett said that if you take a job that you love, you will "jump out of bed in the morning." So, don't wait for your old age to do what you love. Don't look back and say "I wish I had

done it different or sooner.”

I’ve always had two loves: basketball and education. In 25 years, those are the only jobs I’ve ever had. And though my career followed an unconventional path because I didn’t make the Boston Celtics and ended up playing ball in Australia, that’s where I met my wife.

It’s funny how things turn out. We are blessed with two wonderful children, a ten-year old daughter and eight-year old son. I’ve had friends make a lot more money than me, but I’ve been so lucky to get up every day, and do something I care passionately about--I wouldn’t change a thing.

So, when you leave here, run for office, volunteer at a local school, or coach a team—even if it sometimes seems the tougher path to take.

Find what you love, find your genius. Find what would you get up and do every day, even if you weren’t getting a paycheck. And whatever that calling is, pursue it with all your heart.

I recognize, of course, that getting a job is important. It’s a big and necessary step. But it’s every bit as important to be an informed and engaged citizen.

President Obama’s election four years ago showed that America has come a long way as a nation. Yet we still have a long way to go to fulfill Dr. King’s dream and the American promise. We’re not in a post-racial America, not yet.

We will be closer to fulfilling that dream when more black and brown children enter kindergarten ready to read.

We will have arrived when more children have fathers that are actively engaged in their lives.

We will have arrived when more black men by their mid-thirties have college degrees and not criminal records.

We will have arrived when our schools are less segregated and racially isolated than when Dr. King was assassinated--instead of more segregated, as they are today.

And we will have arrived when an innocent black teenager in a hoodie is not somehow a criminal suspect.

The truth is that in the years ahead, America will desperately need your leadership. There are so many battles you must help fight and win.

The poll tax and literacy tests once used to bar blacks from voting may be gone. But just since the beginning of 2011, 17 states—one third of the states—have passed laws that restrict the right to vote.

Most of these new laws require citizens to show a government-issued photo ID before being allowed to cast a ballot. It's no secret that the sponsors of these laws know that black and Hispanic voters are overrepresented among citizens without a government-issued photo ID. How was this allowed to happen?

Our nation is similarly engaged in a great debate about education now. It is not a theoretical or academic debate. It is a debate that will have a big impact on the future of Pell Grant scholarships and student loans.

President Obama and I both believe that education is a public good. College should not be reserved only for those who can afford it. In fact, investing in education is the best investment America can make to bolster our competitiveness in a knowledge-based, global economy. If we don't invest today, we will lose tomorrow.

Yet, we know that not everyone in Congress agrees. Some see student aid for middle-class and working and poor families as an expense that should be cut back in tight times, not as an investment in the future. One recent presidential candidate even called President Obama a snob for wanting more folks to go to college.

Getting an education isn't snobbery—it's the ultimate act of self-empowerment. The pursuit of knowledge is a sacred journey that people have literally died for. There was a time in this country's history when you could be whipped and beaten for teaching a slave to read.

Why was that? Because knowledge is power—and while you can lose many things in life, an education can never be taken away from you.

When I look out at all of you today, I don't see snobs. I see students and families who worked hard and sacrificed and saved to send their children to Howard.

I see mothers and fathers with sons and daughters who will be the first in their family to graduate from college.

And I see committed students who achieved their dreams of earning a Howard degree with the help of Pell Grants and federal student loans.

Zora Neale Hurston, one of America's greatest writers and a Howard alumnus, beautifully captured the power of a college education when she described what it was like for her to hear Howard's alma mater sung.

She said: "My soul stood on tip toe and stretched up to take in all that it meant . . . [I wanted to] be worthy to stand there under the shadow of the hovering spirit of Howard. I felt the ladder beneath my feet."

I felt the ladder beneath my feet . . . Yes, she felt the sturdy rungs of the ladder built by those who came before her. She understood that education was a climb--one she couldn't have made without those who preceded her and whose memory she honored.

As you leave Howard, I hope you will always feel the ladder beneath your feet. There's more than one way to thank those who came before you--and to give back to those who will climb that ladder after you.

Don't take my word for it. Ask your fellow Howard students who are graduating today.

Ask Victoria Fortune, who, after the earthquake in Haiti, organized a benefit concert at Howard that raised more than \$17,000 for the relief effort--and then took a trip to Haiti to help on the ground in two orphanages.

Ask April Vance, who started a non-profit that provides much-needed mentors for middle school and high school students in foster care. More than 160 students in the DC area are now enrolled in her program.

Ask chemical engineering major Shorma Bianca Bailey. The White House picked Shorma as a champion of change for encouraging more women and girls to go into science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Shorma is now president of the Howard Chapter of Engineers Without Borders.

I hope that many of you will leave here today thinking about how you can strengthen our education system, especially for children of color.

There are so many ways to give back—teach, become a principal, tutor,

mentor children, shape policy, and become an advocate.

Ask Michael Powell, who got his masters degree at Howard's School of Education.

When Michael graduated from college he became a DC firefighter. But he came from a family where you were either a "preacher or a teacher"--and before long he felt the call of the classroom.

Michael went on to win an Outstanding Young Educators award for his work as the Assistant Principal at Patuxent Elementary School in Upper Marlboro, Maryland.

He won that national award because he worked tirelessly to help the whole child. He created the No Child Left Inside program to excite children's interest in environmental science. His students have planted more than 1,500 trees and maintained historic trails.

He didn't stop there. He created a father's group--and after the big blizzard in 2010, the fathers got together and shoveled a mile of sidewalk so that their children could walk to school.

One father had not seen his son since the day he was born. But when his son sent him a flyer to attend a father's day gathering at the school, the father came and started visiting with his son every week. Today, his son is on the honor roll.

And finally, ask Andre Evans. Like Michael Powell, he didn't start out as a teacher. Andrew was a district sales manager.

Then, he heard about Howard's Ready to Teach program, which prepares African-American men to become teachers in five urban school districts. With less than two percent of our nation's teachers being black males, we need to support and expand programs like Ready to Teach.

Andre's school in Houston didn't have a library. So, every week Andre went to the public library, carefully chose books for his second graders, and carted them back to his classroom. He knew that you are not truly free if you cannot read.

Since 2007, Howard's Ready to Teach program has received 780 applicants for 80 slots. Already, it has produced four teachers-of-the-year—and one of them is Andre Evans. How many of you want to

follow in his footsteps?

Four years ago, when you arrived at Howard, Barack Obama was running for president.

Today, he knows that our work is not done. He knows the future holds big challenges and will require difficult choices and sacrifice.

But he also knows that our future is bright because of young people like you—with the skills, the creativity, the tenacity, and the passion to bring about real and enduring change.

I will never forget that November night four years ago—and I know you won't either.

When the election was called, students in the Blackburn Center jumped with joy. They hugged one another--and wept.

The President's election shattered barriers few dreamed would be broken in our lifetimes.

But there are still barriers ahead—and I have every faith that your generation will break them. As the President said when he spoke at Howard's convocation in 2007, one man does not make a movement. Only you—together--can do that.

So, as you leave here today, savor the moment. Cherish the celebration, your family, and friends. But please, always remember you stand on the shoulders of giants.

Today, you graduate from Howard. Tomorrow, you face new opportunities and challenges.

And when barriers rise up to meet you, when you start to question and doubt if you have what it takes to succeed, remember that you are the proud, prepared graduates of Howard University.

No matter how high you climb, no matter how high you reach, you will always, always feel the ladder beneath your feet.

I could not be more proud of each and every one of you. Congratulations—and good luck!

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