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“Make a Career of Humanity”

Commencement Address

University of the District of Columbia

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President (Allen) Sessoms, Board Chair (Joseph) Askew, members of the UDC community, distinguished guests, my co-honoree and fellow classmates It is a privilege to join you on this special day. I'm humbled by this Honorary Degree, and, as a newly-minted UDC alumnus, I can't wait to be in the stands for our first homecoming football game

I once sat where you do now. In 1962 when I graduated from Georgetown University, our speaker was the legendary American comedian, Bob Hope. All I remember is that he told a lot of jokes that are now out of date, and that his advice to our class on graduating and entering the real world was, “Don't go!” But many of you have already been in the real world as you have worked your way through UDC to your degrees.

So I didn't bring any jokes ... but I do have a few ideas based on my own experiences, and I hope that my words will strike a chord as you reflect upon the next great steps in your lives.

To the Class of 2010, my congratulations. The diplomas you receive today speak to your dreams and your talent, your hard work and your dedication. They also speak to the support you've been given by parents and grandparents, spouses and friends, aunts and uncles, teachers, mentors, and UDC educators. Please join me now in thanking all those here today, or who join us in spirit, whose love has been your launching pad.

I'm honored to join our 482 graduates with so many different talents and opportunities. You represent the future of this city and others -- and your alma mater is a critical resource in the District and beyond.

To President Sessoms -- and your UDC team members, my congratulations to you on your many achievements in the past two years. You are a leader, a standard setter and a change agent. We welcome your striving to make UDC a priority for our city and its people -- and a high performing center of learning preparing its students to thrive in the evermore challenging competitive environment of the 21st Century.

Put simply, a great city must contain a great public university.

Why? Because a great city cherishes its citizens, invests in its people, and helps all members of its community use education to grow their God-given talents ... no matter who they are, or what their age, or where they come from, or how much money they have.

Why else does having a great public university matter so much? Because to build civic strength and sound government, to stay competitive economically and vibrant socially, a great city needs cutting-edge research, intellectual creativity, and the public policy inputs of outstanding university faculty -- in every field from education to entrepreneurship, and from law and nursing to urban planning -- all areas of strength here at UDC.

A great city also needs sustained economic development and a diversity of jobs -- which universities foster through the highly-skilled graduates they create, the economic trends they relate, the new companies they incubate, and the private partnerships they stimulate.

This is the work of the University of the District of Columbia. As it says in our mission statement, "Education ... is central to the development of the city, not only in the present, but also in planning and building for the future." And for this mission to be achieved the private sector -- in business and all of its other institutions -- must resolutely support and collaborate with public universities. Only in this way can we ensure that every dollar invested in UDC and its students will pay compounding dividends year after year.

There's something else inspiring about this institution. As citizens of the District, we all live in history -- history is happening right here, right now -- and so UDC challenges us to know its nuances, learn its lessons, and become active framers of the defining events of the day.

For example, during your UDC careers, each of you experienced one of our country's proudest achievements -- one that was genuinely non-partisan -- when a nation built in part on

the slave system democratically brought to power our first African-American president. I hope that January 20, 2009 was stirring for you and that, whatever your political views, the inauguration of Barack Obama while you were a UDC student will always serve as a reminder that this city offers each of us open lanes of opportunity to become the change that we seek.

I've benefited from the history and tradition of the District for most of my adult life. I came here to attend Georgetown in 1958 at the age of 17, and for most of the next five decades I and my family have been fortunate to be part of this community -- in great moments and tragic times.

I was here in 1960 when John F. Kennedy was elected president -- a generational change that helped open the door to the Civil Rights movement. By 1963 I had left D.C. for three law school years in New York, and watched Dr. King's historic "I Have a Dream" speech from afar.

Five years later, I was back in D.C. working in the Pentagon and I remember those great mountains of smoke rising above the city after Dr. King was shot and killed. Amidst the chaos and the horror, I also witnessed the healing power of those Washingtonians, especially in the African-American community, who were able to lift every voice and sing ... for a new day to begin.

Another memorable occasion was in 1987, when a Congressional committee chaired by the eminent Walter Fauntroy invited my 15 year old daughter Emily and a classmate to testify in support of D.C. statehood. They said then -- in a way that still resonates -- the following:

"Across the country, people protest against big government, against 'those people in Washington' running their lives. District residents suffer from the ultimate in big government: People from all over the country run their lives."

Although we still don't have Home Rule -- and that is a travesty -- we do have across all eight wards a distinct culture that combines two remarkable traditions: On the one hand, our city is the working brain of the American experiment in democracy, and, at the same time, it is also the breathing soul of the African-American freedom struggle. As a result, the city's culture has always been patriotic. It's a culture in which everyday people accept everyday responsibility to make America better and more true to our ideals.

Armed with your UDC degrees, you now have unlimited opportunities to contribute to this culture. I like how Dr. King said it fifty years ago, when I was in college:

Whatever career you may choose for yourself -- doctor, lawyer, teacher -- let me propose an avocation to be pursued along with it. Become a dedicated fighter for civil rights. Make it a central part of your life. It will make you a better doctor, a better lawyer, a better teacher. It will enrich your spirit as nothing else possibly can. It will give you that rare sense of nobility that can only spring from love and selflessly helping your fellow man. Make a career of

humanity You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in.

“Make a career of humanity.” That is Dr. King’s message to you too, conveyed through your UDC education. There are so many ways to do so -- ways that are authentic to your interests, your training, and the activities that you love doing right now.

Take, for example, the world of athletics, which I’ve been involved in since I was old enough to run three steps and fall down. At its best, participation in sports is an intensive education that develops qualities of character and skills critical to success in life. We can cultivate these resources in sports and venues of all types -- from schoolyards and running tracks, to hard-scrabble soccer fields, and to swimming pools in public parks. I grew up playing sports in Jersey City, New Jersey, mostly in tiny, bandbox gyms that usually doubled as dance halls behind bars or restaurants.

Well, some of the greatest teachers in my life -- some of the people who have shaped me the most -- made a career of humanity through their careers in athletics.

I’m thinking, for example, of Eddie Robinson, who took his first and only college football head coaching job in 1941 at Grambling, and went on to win more than 400 games in his career, second most ever -- while breaking down stereotypes that stopped so many African-American men before him from getting the chance to coach or play football at the highest levels.

I'm thinking of Wilma Rudolph, who, running on a sprained ankle, became in the 1960 Olympics the first U.S. woman track athlete to win three gold medals. She became a hero to American girls of all backgrounds and a symbol of the moral imperative of providing equal opportunity to girls to take part in sports at an early age.

I'm thinking of the baseball player Roberto Clemente, a Hall of Famer for the Pittsburgh Pirates from the mid '50s to the early '70s. Born into poverty in Puerto Rico, Clemente always remembered where he came from. In December of 1972, an enormous earthquake devastated Nicaragua. Angered by reports that relief aid was being stolen by a corrupt government, Clemente chartered a plane to deliver supplies himself, but the aircraft crashed soon after take-off, and he died just a few miles from his birthplace. Clemente's legacy in baseball and his heroic devotion to humanity still serve as an inspiration. As he once said, "Anytime you have an opportunity to make a difference ... and you don't do it, you are wasting your time on this earth."

I'm thinking of everyone in the National Football League and with the New Orleans Saints who, after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, supported the decision that our League needed to keep the team in New Orleans and thus contribute to the rebirth of the city. With the collective will of thousands of people, the Superdome was rebuilt and NFL football returned to New Orleans just one year after Katrina. And in February, the Saints won the Super Bowl for the city and for all who survived Katrina, bringing home not just the Vince Lombardi trophy but also the age-old lesson that, at their essence, team sports are really about community.

Each of these figures has had a catalyzing effect on society -- has moved the needle for social justice -- by developing their particular interests and vocations in ways that make a larger social impact. Dr. King and UDC believe that you can do this too.

To give this idea one more human form, I'd like to tell you about a son of this city who has made a career of humanity through the medium of basketball.

A little background. I came to Georgetown in 1958 on a basketball scholarship and to pursue my dream of a college education. In those days, you could be a 6 foot 5 inch forward on a mid-level team. Back then, since first-year students weren't eligible to play NCAA games, we had freshman teams whose schedules included contests against local high schools. It was in that context that I first encountered ... John Thompson, Jr.

Most of you probably know Coach Thompson by achievements as large as his 6 foot 10 inch frame: Almost 600 wins as Georgetown's men's basketball coach over 27 years; one national championship in 1984 and three Final Four trips; head coach of the 1988 Men's Olympic Basketball Team; seven major Coach of the Year awards; 1999 inductee in the Basketball Hall of Fame; and father of the Hoyas' brilliant current coach who bears his name

But five decades ago, the John Thompson I met was a slender 16 year-old starting center of a phenomenal squad at Archbishop Carroll High School. I was a college freshman and he was a high school junior, so I should have had my way, but instead I spent the evening chasing that young man up and down the floor, or looking up at him from the floor, as they smoked us.

That day fifty years ago, John Thompson left an impression. And over the decades of his career that impression has deepened into an abiding influence on me and countless others.

Fast forward about fourteen years to 1972. After a stellar college career at Providence College (where his team beat mine again), two years of backing up Bill Russell with the Boston Celtics, and six years coaching at St. Anthony's High School here in D.C., John Thompson was hired at the age of 30 to coach a Georgetown University team that had gone 3 and 23 the year before.

John turned around the program, as we all know. He outworked and out-thought his competitors. His Georgetown teams were better prepared mentally and physically. He taught an intense style of defense that changed the game of basketball, and coached some of America's greatest athletes, including Patrick Ewing, Dikembe Mutombo, and Alonzo Mourning.

But the bottom line wasn't winning, as much as he loved that. The bottom line was making a deeper difference. Several ways stand out.

First, John Thompson believed passionately in the larger and longer value of education. As a result, he held every player to high academic standards. He imposed on his students the discipline of study halls. He hired an academic coordinator who was tougher than he was. He kept a deflated basketball on his desk -- a reminder for all of his players that some day, when the ball would run out of air for them, they would need an education if they wanted an empowered

life in the economic mainstream. And John Thompson's educational record became a standard for all America: 76 of the 78 young men who played on his Georgetown teams for four years became -- like you -- proud holders of a college degree. Those young men now work in many fields -- from education to law to corporate America to coaching -- success stories in so many human forms.

Second, John Thompson knew that college athletics has a special value for students from lower-income communities -- because it can give those students an access to higher education that they might not otherwise receive. He never forgot his own story, his own humble beginnings -- and how his ability to play basketball facilitated his academic and intellectual development. That's why, in 1989, he became deeply concerned when the NCAA moved towards implementing a new regulation called Proposition 42, which would ban students with SAT's below a set cut-off from receiving athletic scholarships. Coach Thompson believed that basing access to scholarships on SAT scores was discriminatory and unjust because he felt, like many others, that those tests were culturally-biased against students from lower-income and minority communities.

As a result, Coach Thompson made the dramatic statement of walking off the court before two games in 1989, refusing to coach as a protest of this impending NCAA rule change. His act of conscience galvanized the coaches and university presidents all across the country and the controversial new rule was suspended and then revoked.

Finally, John Thompson always kept his own achievements in proportion, giving credit to those who came before him and paying respect to all those on whose shoulders he stood. For example, he has always been a caring presence in Washington, D.C. -- supporting local youth clubs, promoting education and public safety, and honoring the local basketball tradition of the city even as he became a national figure. After Georgetown beat the University of Houston in 1984 to win the national title, and John was asked how it felt to be the first African-American coach to win a major national title, I always remember his answer:

“Plenty of other black coaches could have won an NCAA championship if they ever had the opportunity. It’s not the brains and talent they were missing until I came along. Those have always been there.”

As you reflect upon the stories of all these leaders -- of Eddie Robinson, Wilma Rudolph, Roberto Clemente, the people of New Orleans, and John Thompson -- I hope you see that, as citizens of this great city, you have the power to make a career of humanity.

You've learned important lessons both in the classroom and through your experiences in the community -- and you are prepared to help others.

You've dealt with adversity, you've developed a work ethic and you know the importance of teamwork and respecting others.

You know that you will always remember where you have come from.

You have the values and the character to influence others and to lead in a broad spectrum of endeavors.

Your education at UDC and your life experiences in reaching this day have prepared you well to follow the path of all of these leaders and to create your own pathways to success -- as individuals and, yes, as leaders of our city and our nation.

Thanks for listening. Congratulations, best wishes, and Godspeed....