

Undergraduate Commencement Ceremony

Sunday, December 16, 2007

Opening Remarks by President P. George Benson

Please be seated. I'm George Benson, President of the College of Charleston. Welcome to our Winter Commencement. I am particularly pleased to welcome the many family members, friends, and guests who are here today to celebrate the accomplishments of these terrific students.

This College has a deep, rich history. It was founded in 1770 by a group of men that included three signers of the Declaration of Independence and three signers of the U. S. Constitution. The first classes were held in the basement of the President's House just south of the Cistern Yard beginning in 1785.

Today we begin with our National Anthem. By the way, the National Anthem is a recent addition to this ceremony. It wasn't composed until 18 years after our first commencement ceremony. We will be led by one of our graduating seniors, Cameron Ulmer.

Each one of you should be extremely proud of what you have accomplished here at the College. Our programs are rigorous, intensive, and cutting edge. And you were up to the task! Your efforts have earned you a very valuable degree.

I know you got to this point mostly on your own, but credit should also go to your families and friends. The support system they provide plays a critical role in the educational process. I would like the parents, grandparents, spouses, and other family and friends of the graduates to stand so our students and faculty can thank you. Each of you has made a unique contribution. Each of you is a member of our College of Charleston Family.

I'm sure that at some point during your years at the College, you've taken your family and friends around campus to show them the College of Charleston.

But, it's likely that you pointed to the wrong things. The College is not Randolph Hall, Addlestone Library, the Cistern Yard or any of the other buildings on campus. The College is its people: its students, its faculty, its staff...and its graduates. Our alumni extend the reach of the College around the world. Wherever they are, we are. Lessons learned at the College are influencing life around the globe.

Each class that graduates from the College faces its own unique set of challenges. Some graduates faced war, recession, or personal tragedies. Others were confronted by the transformations of the Industrial Revolution, the struggle for Civil Rights, or the emerging global marketplace.

When Robert Mills was a student here in the late eighteenth century, he lived in a country unsure of itself, struggling to find its new identity. To quote a friend and mentor of mine from

Atlanta, former Coca-Cola executive Earl Leonard, who was playing off Charles Dickens: *"It was not the best of times, not the worst of times, but it was his time."*

When Robert Mills left Charleston to pursue further study in architecture in Philadelphia, his knowledge of Greek and Latin from his days at the college most definitely informed his architectural sense and vision. His neoclassical designs captured the spirit of the young United States.

You can find his work in many towns around the state, but you can also see his bold vision in our nation's capital: He is the architect of the stark, gleaming obelisk that we all know and cherish: the Washington Monument. Robert Mills is recognized today as the first American-born architect.

John C. Fremont studied at the College in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Although separated by only a couple of decades from Robert Mills, he lived in a very different America.

Fremont's America had a beckoning frontier, a manifest destiny to push west. Fremont's America was also slowly coming apart at the seams...over slavery. It was not the best of times, not the worst of times, but it was his time. Fremont was not a passive player in his America. Known as the Great Pathfinder, he led several expeditions to the West, paving the way for the many wagon trains to follow. As the first Republican candidate for president, Fremont was an outspoken opponent of slavery. In fact, as a major general for the Union Army, he issued an order freeing the slaves of Missouri in 1861.

And after California was admitted to the Union, he was one of California's first two U.S. Senators.

Arthur Ravenel and Jim Edwards were both members of the Class of 1950. They carried their diplomas into a world defined by the Cold War and the expansion of American influence around the world. They faced the threat of communism and atomic warfare.

They felt the early tensions of the Civil Rights Movement. It was not the best of times; it was not the worst of times, but it was their time. Both men were active agents for change. Arthur Ravenel distinguished himself in the U.S. Congress and the state legislature, and even today at age 80, he continues to serve the community on the local school board. He is, of course, the namesake of our beautiful new bridge over the Cooper River.

Jim Edwards made his considerable contributions as governor of the state and later as the U.S. Secretary of Energy under President Reagan and then for 17 years as president of The Medical University of South Carolina.

Lastly, Arlinda Locklear, Class of 1973, came of age in a time of turmoil in America. Viet Nam, Watergate, an energy crisis, and racial tensions divided America. It was not the best of times; not the worst of times; but it was her time. Arlinda Locklear was not phased by the divided country. She proceeded to make a difference in her world.

A political science major, she went on to a career in law and focused on equal treatment of Native Americans, particularly in the area of treaty and reservation rights. In her pursuit of

justice, she became the first Native American woman to appear before the U.S. Supreme Court – and in true College of Charleston fashion, she won her case.

If you draw any inspiration from these alumni stories, let it be this: these people did not let their times define them – they defined their times.

You have at your disposal the same tools they had: imagination, knowledge, and the determination to succeed.

Today, we have an energy crisis, a housing crisis, and badly divided political parties. But we also have a strengthening global economy, promising biotech breakthroughs, and a growing worldwide concern and collaboration for saving our environment. It's not the best of times; it's not the worst of times...it's your time! Walk across this stage today, shake our hands, and go out there and change our world!

In a few minutes, you will become alumni of this historic and prestigious university. You will join a network of about 40,000 alumni around the world, a network that I know you will benefit from throughout your career. We look forward to following your careers and celebrating the many successes and accomplishments that lie ahead.

Just as you needed us to reach the gateway to your career, we need you to help the College of Charleston reach it's potential. We need your expertise, your advice, your feedback. We need your help as advocates for the College...in recruiting new students...in strengthening our relationships with the many institutions you will work in...and the communities you will live in.

We need your help in building a vibrant and responsive alumni network. And, yes, we will need your financial support. You will be hearing from me and my successors once or twice a year...for the rest of your lives!