# Remarks by the First Lady at North Carolina A&T University Commencement

Greensboro Coliseum
Greensboro, North Carolina

10:44 A.M. EDT

MRS. OBAMA:  Good morning, everyone.  (Applause.)

AUDIENCE:  Good morning.

MRS. OBAMA:  You all, rest yourselves.  (Laughter.)  First of all, let me thank Chancellor Martin for that very kind introduction.  I also want to thank Davonta and everyone from the Board of Governors, the Board of Trustees, the faculty, and all of the staff here who have worked so hard on this event and on making you the men and women that you are.

I also have to thank the University Choir.  You all are amazing.  (Applause.)  As the Chancellor said, you all are becoming regulars at the White House, and that’s a good thing, singing at our Black History Month events for the last two years.  It's just amazing to hear those voices pouring through the White House.  It's very powerful, and it is obviously such a pleasure to hear your beautiful music here today.

And of course, I want to join in on thanking all the folks who have made this day possible, the people who have been with you all every step of the way –- yes, your families, including all those watching on campus or at home.

These folks have given you that shoulder to lean on, and that hug when you’ve done well, and maybe that kick in the butt when you need to do a little bit better, right?  (Laughter.)  And none of you would be where you are today without their love and support.  So, again, let’s give them all another round of applause, because today is their day too.  (Applause.)

And most of all, I want to thank this fine-looking group right in front of me –- (applause) -- the graduates of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Class of 2012!  (Applause.)  Congratulations!  You all have worked so hard and I know you have grown so much, and you’ve come to truly represent a little something called Aggie Pride!

AUDIENCE:  Aggie Pride!  (Applause.)

MRS. OBAMA:  All right!  I like that.  (Laughter.)

Let me tell you, it is an honor to be here at North Carolina A&T, a true honor.  You all have such a proud tradition here in Greensboro.  For years, you have produced more African American engineers –- and more African American female engineers –- than just about anywhere else in America.  (Applause.)

You have produced some of our nation’s finest leaders in business, government, and our military.  (Applause.)  The first African American Justice on the North Carolina Supreme Court was an Aggie.  (Applause.)  So was the second African American astronaut.  (Applause.)  And so were those four young men who sat down at a lunch counter 52 years ago and will stand forever in bronze in front of the Dudley building.  (Applause.)

Now, I know that all of you know the story of the Greensboro Four and how they changed the course of our history.  But since we have the nation watching, let's talk a little bit.  (Laughter and applause.)

It’s easy to forget that before they were known as heroes, they were young people just like all of you -- even younger.  They were freshmen here at A&T.  Three of them grew up right here in North Carolina; they all lived on the same floor in Scott Hall.  They weren’t trailblazers or legends back then.  So we have to ask ourselves, how did these young men get from where they were to the history books?  And believe it or not, the spark might have come on a bus ride.

One of the four, Joseph McNeil, had spent Christmas in New York, and he took a bus from there back to school here in Greensboro.  When the bus stopped in Philadelphia, he could eat wherever he chose.  But when he got off the station in Greensboro, the food counter here wouldn’t serve him.

Now, this wasn’t exactly new.  Joseph had lived with these boundaries for years.  But this time, it really hit him.  And although he was the exact same person in Greensboro that he’d been just a few hours earlier in Philly, he was made to feel like a fraction of the man he had become.

Here in the state where he was born and raised, in the city where he was working so hard to get an education and grow into a responsible, self-respecting man, he was treated like he didn’t even matter; like he wasn’t even welcome in the place he called home.  Imagine the humiliation he must have felt.  Imagine his pain and his outrage.

So when Joseph got back to his dorm room that night, his mind was probably already racing.  He started talking to his roommates; they pulled in two friends from down the hall, and together over the next couple of weeks they decided to do more than just talk.  They decided to act.  And on a Monday afternoon, the four of them met up after class and headed downtown.

And I’m sure their hearts were racing.  I’m sure they’d barely slept the night before.  Remember, everything was on the line for these young men.  They were considered the lucky ones.  They were some of the very few African American young people at the time who had the chance to attend college.  They were on the path to achieve something that most black folks could only dream of.  And here they were, risking all of that for what they believed in.

This was something that a lot of people -- black folks back then -- didn't do because the stakes were so high.  Because remember, this was 1960, and if you used the wrong water fountain, or sat on the wrong seat on the bus, or stepped your foot in the wrong part of the theater you might get heckled or spat on or beaten -- or even worse.

So as they were walking downtown, one of the four was actually wondering to himself whether he’d wind up coming back to campus in a pine box.  But when they got downtown and saw that Woolworth’s sign, there was no turning back.  They sat down on those four stools at the lunch counter and ordered coffee.  They were refused, but they didn’t get up.

And that first day, they were there for just an hour or so.  Then they went back to campus and told other students what they’d done -- and some didn’t even believe them.  But the next day, about 20 more students showed up.  And within a week, it was more than a thousand.

In the coming weeks and months, the demonstrations spread from Greensboro to places like Richmond, and Nashville, and Jackson and more than 50 other cities all across the country.  (Applause.)  And by end of July, Woolworth’s -- one of the biggest chain stores in the world -- was forced to end their policy of discrimination.  And the Civil Rights movement was growing stronger every day.  (Applause.)

And all of this started because of a bus ride and some dorm room conversations.  It all started because a small group of young people had their eyes open to the injustices around them.  It all started because they decided, as one of the four told the newspaper on the first day of the protests, that it was “time for someone to wake up and change the situation.”  And that, more than anything else, is the story of our nation’s progress right from the very beginning.

It’s the story of the farmers and cobblers and blacksmiths who took on an empire; the abolitionists who ran that Underground Railroad; the women who mobilized; the workers who organized; the individuals of every background, color, creed and orientation who worked in ways large and small to give us the country that we have today.  Every single one of them decided that at some point, it was time to wake up and change the situation.

And that is what I want to talk with all of you about today –- how all of the work and the sweat and the passion that so many people poured into this country must be met with work and sweat and passion of our own.  (Applause.)  And as graduates of this proud university, as young people like those who always stoked the fires of progress, our country is counting on all of you to step forward and help us with the work that remains.  We need you.

Now, I’ll be the first to admit that it can be easy to lose sight of that responsibility -- especially when you first graduate from college.  You’re struggling to pay off your student loans, and you’re putting in extra hours to make a name for yourself at work.  You’re trying to figure out who you want to spend the rest of your life with.  Oh yeah, and I remember that like it was yesterday.  (Laughter.)

Like all of you, I worked hard all through school.  I earned my BA, my JD -- and I had the student loans to show for it.  So I did what I thought I should do -- I got a great job at one of the biggest law firms in Chicago, and before long, I was checking all the boxes you were supposed to check.  Fat paycheck -- got it.  Nice car -- got it.  Big, fancy office -- got it.

But then, when I was 26 years old, one of my best friends from college died of cancer.  Like that, she was gone.  Less than a year after that, my father died after battling multiple sclerosis for years.  Just like that, I’d lost two of the people I loved most in the world.

So there I was, not much older than all of you, and I felt like my whole world was caving in.  And I began to do a little bit of soul searching.  I began to ask myself some hard questions.  Questions like:  If I die tomorrow, what did I really do with my life?  What kind of a mark would I leave?  How would I be remembered?  And none of my answers satisfied me.

I had everything I was told I should want, but it still wasn’t enough.  And I realized that no matter how long I stayed on that job, no matter how many years I pursued someone else’s definition of success, I was never going to have a life that felt like my own.

And so, to the surprise of my family and friends, I quit that high-paying job and I took a job in the mayor’s office.  That hurt.  (Laughter.)  Then, as the Chancellor said, I became the executive director of Public Allies, a nonprofit organization that trained young people to pursue careers in public service.

Oh, I was earning a fraction of my law firm salary, and I added years to my student loan repayment process.  But let me tell you, I woke up every morning feeling engaged and inspired in ways that I had never felt before.  (Applause.)  I spent every day feeling like I was doing something that truly made a difference in people’s lives.  And twenty years later, looking back on my journey, I see that all of that started with those questions I asked myself in that law office.

So today, as you all are looking ahead toward your own journeys, I would like to pose three of those questions to all of you.

The first question I asked myself was, “Who do I want to be?”  Not what do I want to be, but who.

And it’s so easy to think about your future as a series of lines on a resume.  In many ways, that’s how our society is wired.  And as an adult, when you meet somebody new, they often ask you -- the first question -- they say, what do you do?  And you quickly give the simplest answer -- I'm a nurse, I'm an engineer, I'm a teacher, I'm a lawyer, whatever it is -- and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.  A meaningful, fulfilling career that -- can be the cornerstone of a happy life.

But I also want to stress that your job title and responsibilities, those things are merely what you do, and they will always be.  They are not who you are.  (Applause.)

So as you all are thinking about your careers, I want you to think about what’s important to you.  How does your job fit into a full life -- a complete life?  How are you going to give back?

Are you going to be an engineer, or are you going to be an engineer who volunteers in a science class at a local school twice a week?  (Applause.)  Are you going to go into business, or are you going to be the CEO who sponsors community theater productions, and those 5K runs, and the local little league team?

Who are you going to be?

Are you going to be the nurse who serves in the National Guard every other weekend, and writes the weekly bulletin for church?  Are you going to be the award-winning journalist who raises a beautiful family, who serves on the PTA, who drives the carpool, who was in every single way -- voted in every election, every year, every single year?

It is critical that you start thinking about these things now, and keep coming back to them.  Because I'm going to warn you –- those daily to-do lists that will creep up on you, those deadlines at work, the pressure to keep climbing and achieving and acquiring –- trust me, all of that adds up.  It forms a powerful current.  And if you’re not focused on who you want to be and how you want to live your life, trust me, it will sweep you away.

So you have got to keep your bearings.  You’ve got to figure out what matters to you and stay true to those values.  You’ve got to keep your eyes open as you make your way in the world.

And that leads me to my second question.  I want you to ask yourselves, “What’s going on in the world around me?”

It’s true that the world is different today than it was for the Greensboro Four and others who came before them.  You won’t see any “whites only” water fountains.  You won’t see women turned away at the polls.  You may not hear the words of hatred and discrimination every day.  And all of that, those are signs of how much progress that we've made.  But we all know that there are still plenty of serious injustices crying out for our attention.  (Applause.)  We know this.

Yes, we outlawed segregation in our public schools nearly sixty years ago, but we all know that every child is not getting the same quality of education today.  (Applause.)  That we know.

Yes, women gained the right to vote nearly a century ago, and women now make up nearly half of our work force -- yet they still earn only 77 cents for every dollar a man earns, and for African American women, it’s just 64 cents.  (Applause.)

Yes, we passed a federal hate crimes law, but we all know that prejudice of all kinds exists -- all kinds -- for all kinds of people.  Too often that still remains.

So take a look around, and I guarantee you that you will see that there is plenty of work left to be done.

Maybe it’s the school on the other side of town with crumbling classrooms and a couple of old computers, and teachers who are as outnumbered as they are overworked.  Or maybe it’s the cash-strapped homeless shelter that keeps dozens of people warm every night, but their grant money ran out.  Maybe it’s the city hall in dire need of fresh ideas.  Maybe it’s a river lined with trash.

Everywhere we look, there are wrongs just waiting to be made right.  But again, I warn you –- those wrongs won’t go away.  And they will entrench themselves deeper and deeper unless we act.

And that leads me to the third and final question.  We need you to ask yourselves:  "How can I help?"  It’s a simple question.  "How can I help?"  And the answers are often obvious.

That failing school?  Volunteer there before work.  Donate your old laptop.  Organize a group to paint a mural on the playground.  The homeless shelter in danger of shutting its doors?  Start a fundraising drive.  That filthy river bed?  Put on some gloves and pick up a bucket.  Those nationwide inequalities?  That stagnant city hall?  Immerse yourselves in information.  Become familiar with your elected representatives.  Vote –- not just once in a while, but every year, in every election.  (Applause.)  And even better, run for a seat at the table yourself.

The fact is, we simply cannot move forward unless all of us are engaged.  And being engaged means not simply recognizing what’s wrong, not simply complaining about and talking about our problems, but acting.  It means waking up and changing the situation.  And that’s a lesson that so many of you have already begun to learn during your time here at A&T.

This year alone, students at this university have volunteered nearly 35,000 hours of service.  (Applause.)  You’ve mentored your peers and helped young people, students, transition to college.  You’ve marched and walked for causes you believe in.  You’ve cleaned up streets.  You’ve served at the YMCA, Habitat for Humanity and so many other organizations.  And some of you have committed yourselves to serving our country -- including 11 of you who will be commissioned as officers in the Army and the Air Force later this afternoon.  (Applause.)

And with that kind of action and that kind of commitment, all of you have begun to carry on that proud legacy of the Greensboro Four.  And today, I’m reminded of a quote from one of those young men.

Years after he’d made history at that lunch counter, Franklin McCain said these words.  He said:  “This is my country.  I fought for the chance to make it right.  No one's going to deny me the opportunity.  I am going to be a full participant in every aspect of this community, as well as my kids.”

That’s what they were fighting for.  That’s why they sat down on those stools -- so that they could be full participants in their communities, and that so could you.  They were fighting so that all of you -- and me -- could have opportunities they couldn’t even imagine.  And look around.  Just look around.  That’s exactly what we’ve got.

We’re not weighed down by the kind of baggage that folks had back then.  We do live in a country that’s more supportive, more open, more inclusive than ever before.  We've got rights and freedoms and possibilities that they would have given anything to have for themselves.  But with all of those advantages comes a set of responsibilities.

We’ve got a responsibility to protect the ground that’s already been won, because it can just as easily be lost.  (Applause.)  It can be gone.  We’ve got a responsibility to live up to the legacy of those who came before us by doing all that we can to help those who come after us.  That’s how we’ve always made progress -- each generation doing its part to lift up the next.

Each generation does its part to perfect our union.  Each generation looks at the world around them and decides that it’s time to wake up and change the situation.  And we’ve always looked to our young people to lead the way.  We always have.

So graduates, now it’s your turn.  It’s time for you to take that baton.  Take it.  It’s time for you to carry the banner forward.  It’s time for you to wake the rest of us up and show us everything you’ve got.

That’s what Aggies like you have always done.  (Applause.)  And that is your history, and that is your legacy.  That is who you are.  Never forget that.

And let me tell you something -- that is why me and my husband and the folks all across this country, man, we are so proud of you all.  We are so proud.  And because of you, we are so hopeful about our future.  Yes we are.  Know that.  (Applause.)

So graduates, I love you all.

AUDIENCE:  We love you too!

MRS. OBAMA:  I cannot wait to see that all you will achieve and all that you will contribute in the years ahead.  You have everything before you.

God bless you all, and good luck.
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