

2018 May Commencement Ceremonies

Remarks from the May 6, 2018, 2:00pm Commencement Ceremony

President Eli Capilouto

May 6, 2018

“There is no vaccination against ignorance, but there is us. There is this university. And we still have heavy doors to open, unmet obligations to the land and its people. There are still leadership opportunities to advance the Commonwealth, this nation, and our world towards fulfilling its potential, towards meeting its lofty promises.”

There is us. There is this University.

These compelling words were penned by University of Kentucky English Professor and former Kentucky poet Laureate Frank X Walker in honor of the University’s 150th anniversary in 2015.

His poem, “Seedtime in the Commonwealth,” acknowledges “our imperfect past, our opportunity to ‘make our ourselves right for the fight today,’” and the promise of this place to seize the “leadership opportunities to advance” those we serve toward their potential.

The words of this poem that call to us, not them, but us, are now permanently affixed to a wall on a path toward the new Bill Gatton Student Center. Where on the guideposts of our home for students they challenge us to act on nurturing community—to act as us for us, all of us, for a greater good.

This building was named in honor of one of our alums who is passionately committed to building a bridge for the generations who, together, follow on the path he once walked as a student. So, that in the words of his favorite poem, the “Bridge Builder,” “chasms deep and wide may be naught to those who follow.”

The words of these poets live on in each of you as you celebrate all you’ve accomplished to reach this milestone.

You embody the promise of this University.

Among you are graduates who came to this campus four years ago from big cities and rural hamlets across our state, country, and world. You came to this university with a diverse array of lived experiences, cultural and ethnic foundations, identities, and preconceived notions about the world and your place in it.

Today, you leave our campus as different people. You leave campus as graduates of the University of Kentucky ready for the fight today; to trod your distinctive path in the world.

Your stories inspire me, and they should inspire you.

This weekend, your fellow graduates will hear from students who followed our poets’ call “to seize the leadership opportunities to advance those we serve.”

A student who came to the University of Kentucky from Chad in 2014 knowing no English. He followed his father, who graduated from the University some 30 years ago.

He enrolled in and completed an English as a Second Language course before beginning his bachelor's degree in Public Health and minor in neuroscience.

As a Chellgren Fellow and Lewis Honors College student, he found a passion for undergraduate research and addressing the detrimental effects of Malaria on his home country of Chad. He spent his last year studying how cerebral malaria can be a risk factor for future neurodegenerative diseases.

A recipient of the Singletary Outstanding Senior Award, he will begin a master's degree program in Global Health and Population at Harvard University before attending medical school.

Your fellow graduates will hear from...

A student from Fort Mitchell, Kentucky graduating with a dual-degree from the Gatton College of Business. She came to UK as a Singletary Scholar and was deeply engaged in her college as a student.

For her work, she earned Omicron Delta Kappa's lauded Maurice A. Clay Award and the College of Communication's Excellence in Business Communication Award. A Chellgren Fellow, Global Scholar, and Lewis Honors College student, she volunteered with the Kentucky Refugee Ministry as an English tutor and The Well of Lexington – a home for women who have been victims of sex trafficking. She also cofounded the Empower Club for Girls.

After graduating, she will begin work with a private consumer consulting firm in Cincinnati, Ohio

And, today, you will hear from one of your fellow students...

Elizabeth Foster, from Owensboro, Kentucky, who is graduating with a degree in electrical engineering and certificate in power and energy studies from UK's College of Engineering.

Vice President of Student Government Association, volunteer with DanceBlue, Lewis Honors College student, member of the Society for Women Engineers, and tour guide in UK's Visitor Center, she was selected as a Mickey Leland Energy Fellow in Electrical Engineering for the US Department of Energy's Strategic Petroleum Reserve in New Orleans.

As a student, she also interned for Schneider Electric and Belcan Engineering Corporation. After graduation, she will attend the University of California at Berkeley for her Master's in Engineering.

Within these stories and countless others spread across all of you are the often invisible but profound acts of kindness and empathy. These are the rich lessons you leave us and me. It is the cohesive force that keeps us together as a community despite our differences.

How did you do this?

You respectfully listened to one another when it is most hard to do so, those times when you didn't understand or find justified someone's position or pain and when you didn't agree.

When you chose to listen simply out of respect for a fellow human being you collectively preserve our shared humanity, you raise the odds of reconciliation of those matters that divide us as families and citizens of this country and world.

You are among the more than 5,300 Wildcats graduating this weekend who will go on to do interesting work and offer important contributions. You will deliver on the promise of this University. You will confront the difficult questions of our day practicing empathy and hope.

Questions of our shared and sacred rights.

Questions of technological advance and occupational displacement.

Questions that continually challenge us intellectually and ethically.

And I am confident you will find answers that reconcile our personal, economic, social, and health disparities and divides. You will be the future bridge builders to "make naught the chasms deep and wide."

Your answers will not always require bold and broad action, or merit public acclaim, but instead ask of you to listen with empathy and give a little more of yourself to your fellow human beings. Because that fractional commitment may be enough to ensure that the promise of this place endures.

After all, there is us. There is this university.

There is you.