**Stephanie Ann Carter**

**2019 Commencement Remarks**

I’d like to begin by thanking Dr. Kristine Young, as well as Gerianne Brusati and the entire administration here at SUNY Orange for giving me this opportunity to share my words with all of you today.

I would also like to take a moment to recognize the guidance and encouragement of Professors Amanda Crowell and Stephen Meagher, and to give a very special thank you to Professor Diane Bliss for giving me my very first “C” on a paper and thereby encouraging me to never settle and to always aim higher. Congratulations on your retirement, Professor Bliss, I hope you enjoy every minute of it.

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Orange County Community College. Community college. Doesn’t have the same ring as “university,” does it?

And yet, it is times like these that … We need community. more. than. ever.

When Bob Dylan said that the times they are a changing, his was a statement that would come to resonate with every generation after.

Indeed, we are generation experiencing profound changes in the way we communicate, contribute, and care. Changes in the way we live and love and learn.

We are subject to profound world events and polarizing world leaders. We are sometimes struck by debilitating fear and uncertainty.

But like all of history, this cycle of challenges is simply repeating itself, and like history, what sees us through these times is *community*.

A community is defined as “a body of persons having common social, economic, and political interests or a common history”

Now, we are wide and wonderfully varied group of students. Socially, we come from different lives, different places, and, in my case, different decades.

as for political interests? Well there is the age old adage about religion and politics and I figured that just maybe, actually, that definitely applies to a commencement speech.

But what we do share, whether we like it or not, is a history.

A history of first day jitters, and losing our way, both on campus and in life. Of the professors we love, and the ones we may not. Of late night cramming and copious amounts of coffee. Of exam nerves, and writers block, and deadlines, and failures, and victories.

And it is this history that, by definition, creates our community.

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When I stepped on to this campus just under two years ago I was 30 years old. I was a mother of one and I had probably worked more jobs than both of your parents combined. I had little to no direction in my life, and… I thought I knew everything.

But what I didn’t know was … in addition to learning a whole lot literature, and spending one really crazy summer on the Rowley Center roof for Astronomy with Professor Blon, was that…

My peers and my professors, this new community I had inherited, would become the springboard that would propel me to standing on this stage and telling my story. It would be their support, their wisdom and their contributions that would carry me through to the degree I receive today.

And so I made a point. to cultivate that sense of community. To encourage bonding and friendship amongst this assorted and eclectic group of students, that I, on the surface, had nothing in common with.

This started with a hello.

By some stroke of luck, each of my semesters here I would, at some point in my day, walk from the Biotech Building to Harriman Hall. During this trek I would make a point of walking past the greenhouses and through the garden. It was my little moment of zen. And during these few moments every morning, I would make a point to say hello to anyone I passed. Outside of the garden, I could resume grumbling into my coffee and worrying about deadlines, but if you passed me within those walls, then you were the (sometimes startled) recipient of my very small, very simple attempt to connect with this community.

So with this gesture, I promised myself that I wouldn’t…

judge a class by the first day —— the seemingly worst teachers on day one tend to be the most influential on day 101.

That I wouldn’t….

judge a peer by whether or not they fit my idea of a friend, because you never know who is in need of help or understanding or just a kind word.

And that I wouldn’t pass up an opportunity to potentially change someone’s day with just a simple hello.

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I’d like to end today with a bit of poetry, as it is something that I am very passionate about. The grandfather of American Poetry, Walt Whitman, is someone that, as students, I’m sure we have all shared some part of this journey with.

And although community will indeed lift us up and support us, there will be times when you will question just what the hell you are doing here, and for that, the old man with the wise beard has just the thing.

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,

Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish,

Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,

Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,

Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,

The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?

*Answer.*

That you are here—that life exists and identity,

That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.