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Nannerl O. Keohane: The Class of 2004 Left Its Mark on Duke University

President urges class to take on responsibility, leadership as they leave the campus

Thursday, May 6, 2004 | *The following is the Baccalaureate ceremony talk delivered by President Keohane during graduation weekend to the Class of 2004.*

First, congratulations to those who are receiving graduate and professional degrees, and a warm welcome to all the parents, family and friends listening from Page Auditorium. My charge today is primarily to the graduating seniors, but we know that this is a crucial moment for all of you as well, and we are pleased that you can be here.

Members of the Class of 2004: Return with me in memory to that hot day in August 2000 when you gathered in the Chapel for Opening Convocation. Duke was brand new for you, and the new century - indeed the new millennium - had only just begun. There was a heady sense of optimism in the air, matching the eager expectations that you felt in your first days at Duke.

It's true that the dot.com bubble was finally deflating, and it no longer seemed so clear that the laws of economics had all been repealed; but employers had courted the seniors graduating from the Class of 2000 like royalty, and we'd survived the Y2K scare - which turned out to be much less of a big deal than people had predicted. The U.S. felt secure in Fortress America, with our great oceans and friendly borders and strong armed forces.

Think what we did not foresee in the first four years of the new millennium: 9/11 ... the war on terrorism ... SARS ... Afghanistan and Iraq ... the corporate ethics scandals ... an international economy that becomes more closely knit by downsizing and outsourcing jobs, even jobs that were offered to Duke graduates before you. No one could have anticipated all these things in August 2000, any more than anyone could have predicted exactly what your Duke experience would be like.

Of course, back on that hot August day, your thoughts were not about the international economy or Fortress America but about your own future as a Duke student. You were wondering, "Will I ever make a friend in this place? Can I handle the workload?"

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Will my roommate be one of those people who hits her snooze button six times without ever actually waking up? And how will I ever find my way around this place?!"

Fortunately, today you can relax. You did find your way around and make the grade, and all those other things. And your expectations four years ago about your future as a Duke student were probably just as much off base as our expectations of what the new century might be like.

The biggest, most important moments of college - the events and relationships that help define who you are as a person - can almost never be predicted in advance, and rarely appear on your résumé. They may include a sudden awareness that you had understood something for the first time; the moment when you felt responsible for what you knew was true; or an uncomfortable epiphany when a lifelong prejudice was shaken. Those moments may include falling in love, making a friend, finding your voice, feeling empowered.

I asked some of the members of your class whom I know best what meant most to them about their Duke experience. I doubt that their responses will surprise you, although they might surprise your parents, and they might also have surprised your freshman self back in August 2000. The most frequent answers were these: the importance of friendship; understanding people who think quite differently from the way I do; seeing the world on Duke funds, learning to think. One of you said, quite tellingly, "I was never bored at Duke, not one day since the first." That's a pretty compelling tribute to any institutional experience, and I hope the same has been true for each of you.

Your identity as a class has been shaped by a great many changes at Duke, as well, since that hot August day. Your class had to live through the residential dislocation as sophomores moved to West en masse; the vagaries of curricular evolution as an invisible hand kept twitching the carpet of Curriculum 2000 under your feet; and the drifting of the social scene off campus. Meanwhile, a huge number of buildings were renovated or sprung up during your tenure, from the Richard White Lecture Hall to CIEMAS to the Nasher Museum. "Construction," as DSG president Matt Slovik said, "is part of the Duke experience."

Yet many things are the same, from the Georgian symmetry of East Campus to the Gothic heft of West; from your sharp intake of breath when you catch sight of the Chapel at twilight to your pleasurable strolls through the azaleas and tulips in the Gardens; from your intimate knowledge of Duke's core strengths to your endless griping about Marketplace food. There are the familiar friendships you made in your freshman dorms and classes; athletic teams with consistently winning seasons; a library that

manages to remain more real than virtual. And for all our scheduling and rescheduling of 32 buses, they still seem to fill up and overflow, or suffer some mysterious delay, just when you need them most.

Your families can attest that you have come a long way from that nervous, eager kid we met in the hot Chapel in August 2000. But they will be quick to note that you are still the same human being you always were - just more polished, urbane, articulate, worldly and - yes - employable.

It has been said, often and wrongly, that your generation is apathetic and selfish. That is not what I see. I see four-fifths of your class having volunteered in the Durham community during your time here. I see selfless devotion to causes from environmental activism to social justice. I see energy, leadership and compassion from many of you, as individuals.

What I do not yet see - and what I urge you to develop together - is a sense of how much power you have collectively, not just as single individuals. Develop your social and political power as a people. This, it seems to me, is what has been too often missing in your approach to moral questions.

Making a difference will not be easy; there will be great and difficult challenges. In 1918, a very thoughtful German statesman and social theorist, Max Weber, gave a lecture at the University of Munich titled "Politics as a Vocation." Weber describes politics as "a strong and slow boring of hard boards" that "takes both passion and perspective. Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth," he writes, "that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible." Nor woman either, to be sure.

Weber's plea is in the same key as Terry Sanford's "outrageous ambitions," his famous characterization of Duke University's motive force. And both Weber, in the very uncertain days just after his country suffered wrenching defeat in the first world war, and Sanford, in the crucial days of building the "New South" after the isolation and stagnation of the Jim Crow period, were willing to take risks and put their own reputations and careers on the line for things that they believed in. We admire them for their courage, their foresight and their persistence. Passion and perspective ... the slow boring of hard boards.

Before I close, let me share with you something I just discovered about Duke. Like you, I'm still learning about this place even as I prepare to leave it for awhile. I learned that the tradition of ringing the bells at twilight took on new meaning exactly 100 years ago, and it had everything to do with commencement. The Trinity College class of 1904 established the precedent of

lowering a flag at the sounding of Trinity's traditional "sunset bell" on their last day, when every one of the 28 "retiring seniors" (two women and 26 men) paused with uncovered heads. There was no carillon, no West Campus, no Chapel as we know it; but the sunset bell sounded daily on East Campus. And at their commencement, your predecessors wanted to make a little space for reflection, and they carved out such a space to demarcate the boundary of their education.

The building housing the bell was destroyed in a fire in 1911; the bell itself was replaced by the 6,500-pound Trinity College Bell, which still hangs in a steel tower next to Brodie Gym. The replacement was a gift from Benjamin Newton Duke, the brother of James Buchanan Duke; his statue stands in front of Baldwin Auditorium. This newer bell has never been incorporated into a building in its 90-plus years, but next year, with the completion of the new residence hall on East Campus, it will move to a tower there, and we will have come full circle at last.

I hope all of you, along with all your families and associated friends and relations who have gathered to celebrate this weekend with you will come to the Saturday afternoon reception on the East Duke Lawn that honors the graduating classes. At the reception, I encourage you to be ready for a brief nostalgic ceremony. Precisely at 5:30, the background music from the Duke Wind Ensemble will cease for a moment, an officer will lower the Duke flag from the pole in front of the White Lecture Hall, and the Trinity College Bell will ring out an end to the day and a new beginning for the class of 2004. I suggest you pause for to remember the people you love who have passed on during your Duke years, including members of your family who cannot be with you for commencement. You might wish especially to think of your classmate Maggie Schneider, who died tragically during your junior year. In these few moments, we will also honor the request of the class of 1904, who hoped that future classes would continue their tradition of lowering the flag at the sunset bell during commencement.

Like you, the members of the class of 1904 graduated in the early years of a new century; theirs was a time full of optimism and belief in progress. They could surely never have foreseen what their decades as active citizens and leaders would bring. By the time they returned for their 50th reunion, their alma mater had been transformed from a fine, small regional liberal arts college to one of the South's few research universities, with two entirely new campuses, several strong professional schools and a major medical center. In the larger world, they had lived through two profoundly devastating world wars and the Great Depression. I hope you will live through less exciting times than theirs, but whatever the times may bring, I trust that you will meet the challenges.

And because of what has happened during your Duke years, much more so than for many of the classes that preceded you, the members of the Class of 2004 are already aware of the awesome power and responsibility that await you as a generation preparing for leadership. You will bring to the challenge your own sense of justice, your care for the earth and its peoples, your patriotism and ambition.

I have treasured these years with you. We all feel a complicated mixture of exhilaration, nostalgia, relief, uncertainty and eagerness to get on with the next stage of our lives. Fortunately, Duke will still be here for us when we want to come back for another stint (whether of grad school or teaching), or just to refresh our memories. It will change: they'll keep building buildings, rerouting roads, inventing programs and reshaping curricula. But the Chapel and the Gardens and many of our friends will still be here, and the sunset bell will ring as sweetly as it ever did by any name, even if its overtones are deepened with nostalgia.

And that indelible imprint your class has left on these stones - that too will abide. Do not be surprised if, at some future reunion, ambling across campus at twilight with your spouse or partner on your arm, you imagine the ghost of your younger self slipping behind a pillar or disappearing into a building just at the periphery of your vision. For you have changed Duke as surely as Duke has changed you . . . and Duke will remember.

Members of the class of 2004, movers of mountains and dreamers of dreams: I commend to you the future. Godspeed.

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