

Remarks to Graduating Students Rutgers University – Newark Commencement May 16, 2019

Nancy Cantor
Chancellor

Welcome to all of the Rutgers-Newark family – and we are indeed a family – graduating students and your cherished families, faculty and staff and university leaders who helped us all persevere through these taxing times and reminded us that we all learn together, whether on a screen or close up and personal, and our cherished community partners, who teach us day in and day out that it is all of our collective will that will be needed to make our world an equitable place in which to thrive together. Yes, togetherness is my theme today, for we are back together, thankfully, even as we never truly left each other.

How do we affirm togetherness, when we have gotten so used to being apart, to working and learning from home, to hearing and watching the news rather than living it together? Surely, there has been a lot of creativity born of this adjustment, and this class of graduates knows that all too well. In fact, the creativity of our hybrid world is on display right now at the Paul Robeson Student Center Gallery where the genius of our 2022 Graphics Design senior capstone exhibition demonstrates for all that we can make HYBRID real!

Of course, we shouldn't be surprised that it is the artists – the consummate storytellers – who remind us that behind those flat images on the zoom screen are what the faculty leaders of the capstone course, Jennifer Bernstein and Rebecca Jampol, described as “our beautiful, hyphenated, and intersectional identities, as well as our creative resilience and innovation as a design community during the pandemic.” Well, Rutgers-Newark, what I firmly believe is that we, as a bonded community committed to justice, are all in a design community and we need to get working on our design project for a new, less divisive, and more caring world order.

And, hybrid or in person, virtual or real, at the heart of that task is drawing out our lived experiences, our stories, our histories – and putting front and center the complexity of who we are.

Indeed, that is the great challenge of our time, but I'm optimistic that you, our class of 2022 graduates, have a head-start on this design project, both in light of who you are and how you have experienced each other at Rutgers-Newark. Your personal stories carry forth the threads of others, be it family histories, geographies you have traversed, dreams of others that you are fulfilling.

Lizet Portillo, for example, the daughter of two immigrants who escaped civil war in El Salvador, graduates today not only with a degree from RBS, but having the experience of teaming with another RBS peer, Christopher Calle in forming a digital marketing firm, which she says required them in the pandemic to learn “how to screen print, hold pop up shops, and create our own ecommerce store.” She is walking in the footsteps of her entrepreneurial mother, whom Lizet describes as follows: “My mom's a bad-ass. She's broken a lot of barriers.”

As of course has Lizet, but importantly, she does it with others and for others, reaching out for example in the pandemic to local restaurant owners to offer marketing services. With post-graduation plans “to travel the world while working remotely for Adidas, scale the business, and continue to stay hungry,” she says, “The world is ours.”

That hunger for impact with and for others is a thread that weaves throughout the stories and ambitions of all of you, including Lizet’s peer at RBS, Gary Carter, a leader in our local chapter of the National Association of Black Accountants, who will take his ambitions to KPMG post-graduation, using that platform to work on diversifying corporate America.

His words perfectly capture the energy for collective impact that we hope Rutgers-Newark helps breed. Gary says: “It can be who you know, not what you know. If you’re in, don’t be settled in, don’t get comfortable, help someone else get in.” Gary, we couldn’t have said it better, and that other-directed motivation permeates so many stories here among your class.

I think of Nelson Reyes, another student who travelled long and hard to be on his way to a stellar career as a physician, arriving in the US with his mother at age ten, facing the struggles so painfully familiar to so many of our undocumented heroes and sheroes here today, and then battling with his own cancer diagnosis, while gaining personal strength from volunteering as a crisis counselor and palliative-care aid for others, and leaving here at age 35, with the following inspirational commitment to keep on caring for those others, for as he says: “No matter which subfield of medicine I go into, I know I want to be board-certified in palliative care. I received so much from the hospice patients and families I helped care for.” And they from you, dear Nelson.

That kind of reciprocity of caring inspires the class of 2022’s Maya Abaza, too. She came to this country as a 12-year-old immigrant from Syria, as she says: “learning how to navigate a new lifestyle, and how to exist in a world so unfamiliar has been a challenge I’ve taken on since my arrival in the U.S. After many sleepless nights, ESL courses, and the support of my family, near and far, I completed eight grade and went on to high school.”

Well, she went on to many completions, graduating from Passaic County College and now, from Rutgers-Newark as a BOLD Women’s Leadership Scholar at HLLC, who not only majored in biology and is on her way to fulfilling her dream of becoming a physician, but one who is dedicated to fulfilling her role as a Price Humanities Scholar by blending science and humanities, exemplified by her contributions to the highly successful “faith in the vaccine project,” spreading the word in Newark, especially to youth, on the safety and efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Reflecting on her long journey across the world and through Rutgers-Newark Maya says: “I learned what it meant to show up for people and myself, to love people for who they are, and to hone and nurture the relationships that matter.” Indeed, we can’t ask for anything more from all of you than to model this togetherness, and the strength and activism it breeds.

Lizet, Cristopher, Gary, Nelson, and Maya—and all of you in the class of 2022—are ready to plant a stake in the social landscape for listening and looking and voicing the hybrid nuances of each one of you. All it takes is for each of you to start.

Which brings me to a lesson I carry with me every day. It comes from one of the most impactful women I have ever met, the late Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Muta Maathai, founder of the Green Belt Movement in Kenya. Like you, she aimed high, accomplishing many “firsts” in her life – as the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a Ph.D. and chair of the department of veterinary anatomy at the University of Nairobi – yet she didn’t stop, and when she became keenly aware that daily life was rapidly deteriorating in formerly prosperous rural areas she founded a movement built on each small step forward. The forests were disappearing, the soil was washing away, children were going hungry, and women were walking for hours to look for water. She made what she later described as an “innocent response”: she planted a tree and asked other women to do the same, sowing the seeds for a movement that eventually planted 51 million trees.

Taking that one first step---deciding to plant a simple tree---was crucial for her. As she said later: “Until you dig a hole, you plant a tree, you water it and make it survive, you haven’t done a thing. You are just talking.”

What I love about you, our dear graduates of the class of 2022, is that none of you is “just talking,” and you have already planted so many trees. And I fully believe that the richness and nuance of what you plant will open doors to join together, to uncover the strings that tie your fate to so many others’ both like you and unlike you, next door, and across the seas, from the past and into the future. Do it together, one tree at a time, starting now, and imagine what will bloom.