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Remarks by the First Lady at Tuskegee University Commencement Address

Tuskegee University

Tuskegee, Alabama

12:30 P.M. CDT

MRS. OBAMA: Thank you all. (Applause.) Thank you so much. (Applause.) Let's let our graduates rest themselves. You've worked hard for those seats! (Applause.)

Let me start by thanking President Johnson for that very gracious introduction, and for awarding me with this honorary degree from an extraordinary institution. I am proud to have this degree -- very proud. (Applause.) Thank you. Thank you so much. (Applause.)

I want to recognize Major General Williams; Congresswoman Sewell; Zachary; Kalauna; to all of the trustees, the faculty, the staff here at Tuskegee University. Thank you -- thank you so much for this warm welcome, this tremendous hospitality. And I'm so glad to be here. (Applause.)

Before I begin, I just want to say that my heart goes out to everyone who knew and loved Eric Marks, Jr. I understand he was such a talented young man, a promising aerospace engineer who was well on his way to achieving his dream of following in the footsteps of the Tuskegee Airmen. And Eric was taken from us far too soon. And our thoughts and prayers will continue to be with his family, his friends, and this entire community. (Applause.)

I also have to recognize the Concert Choir. Wow, you guys are good! Well done! (Applause.) Beautiful song. (Applause.) And I have to join in recognizing all the folks up in the stands -- the parents, siblings, friends -- (applause) -- so many others who have poured their love and support into these graduates every step of the way. Yeah, this is your day. (Applause.) Your day. (Applause.)

Now, on this day before Mother's Day, I've got to give a special shout-out to all the moms here. (Applause.) Yay, moms! And I want you to consider this as a public service announcement for anyone who hasn't bought the flowers or the cards or the gifts yet -- all right? I'm trying to cover you. (Laughter.) But remember that one rule is "keep mom happy." (Laughter.) All right? (Applause.)

And finally, most of all, I want to congratulate the men and women of the Tuskegee University Class of 2015! (Applause.) T-U!

AUDIENCE: You know!

MRS. OBAMA: I love that. (Applause.) We can do that all day. (Laughter.) I'm so proud of you all. And you look good. (Applause.) Well done!

You all have come here from all across the country to study, to learn, maybe have a little fun along the way -- from freshman year in Adams or Younge Hall -- (applause) -- to those late night food runs to The Coop. (Applause.) I did my research. (Applause.) To those mornings you woke up early to get a spot under The Shed to watch the Golden Tigers play. (Applause.) Yeah! I've been watching! (Laughter.) At the White House we have all kinds of ways. (Laughter.)

And whether you played sports yourself, or sang in the choir, or played in the band, or joined a fraternity or sorority -- after today, all of you will take your spot in the long line of men and women who have come here and distinguished themselves and this university.

You will follow alumni like many of your parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles -- leaders like Robert Robinson Taylor, a groundbreaking architect and administrator here who was recently honored on a postage stamp. (Applause.) You will follow heroes like Dr. Boynton Robinson -- (applause) -- who survived the billy clubs and the tear gas of Bloody Sunday in Selma. The story of Tuskegee is full of stories like theirs -- men and women who came to this city, seized their own futures, and wound up shaping the arc of history for African Americans and all Americans.

And I'd like to begin today by reflecting on that history -- starting back at the time when the Army chose Tuskegee as the site of its airfield and flight school for black pilots. (Applause.)

Back then, black soldiers faced all kinds of obstacles. There were the so-called scientific studies that said that black men's brains were smaller than white men's. Official Army reports stated that black soldiers were "childlike," "shiftless," "unmoral and untruthful," and as one quote stated, "if fed, loyal and compliant."

So while the Airmen selected for this program were actually highly educated -- many already had college degrees and pilots licenses -- they were presumed to be inferior. During training, they were often assigned to menial tasks like housekeeping or landscaping. Many suffered verbal abuse at the hands of their instructors. When they ventured off base, the white sheriff here in town called them "boy" and ticketed them for the most minor offenses. And when they finally deployed overseas, white soldiers often wouldn't even return their salutes.

Just think about what that must have been like for those young men. Here they were, trained to operate some of the most complicated, high-tech machines of their day -- flying at hundreds of miles an hour, with the tips of their wings just six inches apart. Yet when they hit the ground, folks treated them like they were nobody -- as if their very existence meant nothing.

Now, those Airmen could easily have let that experience clip their wings. But as you all know, instead of being defined by the discrimination and the doubts of those around them, they became one of the most successful pursuit squadrons in our military. (Applause.) They went on to show the world that if black folks and white folks could fight together, and fly together, then surely -- surely -- they could eat at a lunch counter together. Surely their kids could go to school together. (Applause.)

You see, those Airmen always understood that they had a "double duty" -- one to their country and another to all the black folks who were counting on them to pave the way forward. (Applause.) So for those Airmen, the act of flying itself was a symbol of liberation for themselves and for all African Americans.

One of those first pilots, a man named Charles DeBow, put it this way. He said that a takeoff was -- in his words -- "a never-failing miracle" where all "the bumps would smooth off... [you're] in the air... out of this world... free."

And when he was up in the sky, Charles sometimes looked down to see black folks out in the cotton fields not far from here -- the same fields where decades before, their ancestors as slaves. And he knew that he was taking to the skies for them -- to give them and their children something more to hope for, something to aspire to.

And in so many ways, that never-failing miracle -- the constant work to rise above the bumps in our path to greater freedom for our brothers and sisters -- that has always been the story of African Americans here at Tuskegee. (Applause.)

Just think about the arc of this university's history. Back in the late 1800s, the school needed a new dormitory, but there was no money to pay for it. So Booker T. Washington pawned his pocket watch to buy a kiln, and students used their bare hands to make bricks to build that dorm -- and a few other buildings along the way. (Applause.)

A few years later, when George Washington Carver first came here for his research, there was no laboratory. So he dug through trash piles and collected old bottles, and tea cups, and fruit jars to use in his first experiments.

Generation after generation, students here have shown that same grit, that same resilience to soar past obstacles and outrages -- past the threat of countryside lynchings; past the humiliation of Jim Crow; past the turmoil of the Civil Rights era. And then they went on to become scientists, engineers, nurses and teachers in communities all across the country -- and continued to lift others up along the way. (Applause.)

And while the history of this campus isn't perfect, the defining story of Tuskegee is the story of rising hopes and fortunes for all African Americans.

And now, graduates, it's your turn to take up that cause. And let me tell you, you should feel so proud of making it to this day. And I hope that you're excited to get started on that next chapter. But I also imagine that you might think about all that history, all those heroes who came before you -- you might also feel a little pressure, you know -- pressure to live up to the legacy of those who came before you; pressure to meet the expectations of others.

And believe me, I understand that kind of pressure. (Applause.) I've experienced a little bit of it myself. You see, graduates, I didn't start out as the fully-formed First Lady who stands before you today. No, no, I had my share of bumps along the way.

Back when my husband first started campaigning for President, folks had all sorts of questions of me: What kind of First Lady would I be? What kinds of issues would I take on? Would I be more like Laura Bush, or Hillary Clinton, or Nancy Reagan? And the truth is, those same questions would have been posed to any candidate's spouse. That's just the way the process works. But, as potentially the first African American First Lady, I was also the focus of another set of questions and speculations; conversations sometimes rooted in the fears and misperceptions of others. Was I too loud, or too angry, or too emasculating? (Applause.) Or was I too soft, too much of a mom, not enough of a career woman?

Then there was the first time I was on a magazine cover -- it was a cartoon drawing of me with a huge afro and machine gun. Now, yeah, it was satire, but if I'm really being honest, it knocked me back a bit. It made me wonder, just how are people seeing me.

Or you might remember the on-stage celebratory fist bump between me and my husband after a primary win that was referred to as a "terrorist fist jab." A little over the years, folks have used plenty of interesting words to describe me. One said I exhibited "a little bit of uppity-ism." Another noted that I was one of my husband's "cronies of color." Cable news once charmingly referred to me as "Obama's Baby Mama."

And of course, Barack has endured his fair share of insults and slights. Even today, there are still folks questioning his citizenship.

And all of this used to really get to me. Back in those days, I had a lot of sleepless nights, worrying about what people thought of me, wondering if I might be hurting my husband's chances of winning his election, fearing how my girls would feel if they found out what some people were saying about their mom.

But eventually, I realized that if I wanted to keep my sanity and not let others define me, there was only one thing I could do, and that was to have faith in God's plan for me. (Applause.) I had to ignore all of the noise and be true to myself -- and the rest would work itself out. (Applause.)

So throughout this journey, I have learned to block everything out and focus on my truth. I had to answer some basic questions for myself: Who am I? No, really, who am I? What do I care about?

And the answers to those questions have resulted in the woman who stands before you today. (Applause.) A woman who is, first and foremost, a mom. (Applause.) Look, I love our daughters more than anything in the world, more than life itself. And while that may not be the first thing that some folks want to hear from an Ivy-league educated lawyer, it is truly who I am. (Applause.) So for me, being Mom-in-Chief is, and always will be, job number one.

Next, I've always felt a deep sense of obligation to make the biggest impact possible with this incredible platform. So I took on issues that were personal to me -- issues like helping families raise healthier kids, honoring the incredible military families I'd met on the campaign trail, inspiring our young people to value their education and finish college. (Applause.)

Now, some folks criticized my choices for not being bold enough. But these were my choices, my issues. And I decided to tackle them in the way that felt most authentic to me -- in a way that was both substantive and strategic, but also fun and, hopefully, inspiring.

So I immersed myself in the policy details. I worked with Congress on legislation, gave speeches to CEOs, military generals and Hollywood executives. But I also worked to ensure that my efforts would resonate with kids and families -- and that meant doing things in a creative and unconventional way. So, yeah, I planted a garden, and hula-hooped on the White House Lawn with kids. I did some Mom Dancing on TV. I celebrated military kids with Kermit the Frog. I asked folks across the country to wear their alma mater's T-shirts for College Signing Day.

And at the end of the day, by staying true to the me I've always known, I found that this journey has been incredibly freeing. Because no matter what happened, I had the peace of mind of knowing that all of the chatter, the name calling, the doubting -- all of it was just noise. (Applause.) It did not define me. It didn't change who I was. And most importantly, it couldn't hold me back. I have learned that as long as I hold fast to my beliefs and values -- and follow my own moral compass -- then the only expectations I need to live up to are my own.

So, graduates, that's what I want for all of you. I want you all to stay true to the most real, most sincere, most authentic parts of yourselves. I want you to ask those basic questions: Who do you want to be? What inspires you? How do you want to give back? And then I want you to take a deep breath and trust yourselves to chart your own course and make your mark on the world.

Kids, it feels like you're supposed to go to law school -- but what you really want to do is to teach little kids. Maybe your parents are expecting you to come back home after you graduate -- but you're feeling a pull to travel the world. I want you to listen to those thoughts. I want you to act with both your mind, but also your heart. And no matter what path you choose, I want you to make sure it's you choosing it, and not someone else. (Applause.)

Because here's the thing -- the road ahead is not going to be easy. It never is, especially for folks like you and me. Because while we've come so far, the truth is that those age-old problems are stubborn and they haven't fully gone away. So there will be times, just like for those Airmen, when you feel like folks look right past you, or they see just a fraction of who you really are.

The world won't always see you in those caps and gowns. They won't know how hard you worked and how much you sacrificed to make it to this day -- the countless hours you spent studying to take this diploma, the multiple jobs you worked to pay for school, the times you had to drive home and get care of your grandma, the evenings you gave up to volunteer at a food bank or organize a campus fundraiser. They don't know that part of you.

Instead they will make assumptions about who they think you are based on their limited notion of the world. And my husband and I know how frustrating that experience can be. We've both felt the sting of those daily slights throughout our entire lives -- the folks who crossed the street in fear of their safety; the clerks who kept a close eye on us in all those department stores; the people at formal events who assumed we were the "help" -- and those who have questioned our intelligence, our honesty, even our love of this country.

And I know that these little indignities are obviously nothing compared to what folks across the country are dealing with every single day -- those nagging worries that you're going to get stopped or pulled over for absolutely no reason; the fear that your job application will be overlooked because of the way your name sounds; the agony of sending your kids to schools that may no longer be separate, but are far from equal; the realization that no matter how far you rise in life, how hard you work to be a good person, a good parent, a good citizen -- for some folks, it will never be enough. (Applause.)

And all of that is going to be a heavy burden to carry. It can make you feel like your life somehow doesn't matter -- that you're like the invisible man that Tuskegee grad Ralph Ellison wrote about all those years ago. And as we've seen over the past few years, those feelings are real. They're rooted in decades of structural challenges that have made too many folks feel frustrated and invisible. And those feelings are playing out in communities like Baltimore and Ferguson and so many others across this country. (Applause.)

But, graduates, today, I want to be very clear that those feelings are not an excuse to just throw up our hands and give up. (Applause.) Not an excuse. They are not an excuse to lose hope. To succumb to feelings of despair and anger only means that in the end, we lose.

But here's the thing -- our history provides us with a better story, a better blueprint for how we can win. It teaches us that when we pull ourselves out of those lowest emotional depths, and for the channel our frustrations into studying and organizing and banding together -- then we can build ourselves and our communities up. We can take on those deep-rooted problems, and together -- together -- we can overcome anything that stands in our way.

And the first thing we have to do is vote. (Applause.) Hey, no, not just once in a while. Not just when my husband or somebody you like is on the ballot. But in every election at every level, all of the time. (Applause.) Because here is the truth -- if you want to have a say in your community, if you truly want the power to control your own destiny, then you've got to be involved. You got to be at the table. You've got to vote, vote, vote, vote. That's it; that's the way we move forward. That's how we make progress for ourselves and for our country.

That's what's always happened here at Tuskegee. Think about those students who made bricks with their bare hands. They did it so that others could follow them and learn on this campus, too. Think about that brilliant scientist who made his lab from a trash pile. He did it because he ultimately wanted to help the sharecroppers feed their families. Those Airmen who rose above brutal discrimination -- they did it so the whole world could see just how high black folks could soar. That's the spirit we've got to summon to take on the challenges we face today. (Applause.)

And you don't have to be President of the United States to start addressing things like poverty, and education, and lack of opportunity. Graduates, today -- today, you can mentor a young person and make sure he or she takes the right path. Today, you can volunteer at an after-school program or food pantry. Today, you can help your younger cousin fill out her college financial aid form so that she could be sitting in those chairs one day. (Applause.) But just like all those folks who came before us, you've got to do something to lay the groundwork for future generations.

That pilot I mentioned earlier -- Charles DeBow -- he didn't rest on his laurels after making history. Instead, after he left the Army, he finished his education. He became a high school English teacher and a college lecturer. He kept lifting other folks up through education. He kept fulfilling his "double duty" long after he hung up his uniform.

And, graduates, that's what we need from all of you. We need you to channel the magic of Tuskegee toward the challenges of today. And here's what I really want you to know -- you have got everything you need to do this. You've got it in you. Because even if you're nervous or unsure about what path to take in the years ahead, I want you to realize that you've got everything you need right now to succeed. You've got it.

You've got the knowledge and the skills honed here on this hallowed campus. You've got families up in the stands who will support you every step of the way. And most of all, you've got yourselves -- and all of the heart, and grit, and smarts that got you to this day.

And if you rise above the noise and the pressures that surround you, if you stay true to who you are and where you come from, if you have faith in God's plan for you, then you will keep fulfilling your duty to people all across this country. And as the years pass, you'll feel the same freedom that Charles DeBow did when he was taking off in that airplane. You will feel the bumps smooth off. You'll take part in that "never-failing miracle" of progress. And you'll be flying through the air, out of this world -- free.

God bless you, graduates. (Applause.) I can't wait to see how high you soar. Love you all. Very proud. Thank you. (Applause.)

END 12:56 P.M. CDT

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