



Dr. Kase Lawal
Commencement Address for Texas Southern University
Saturday, May 16, 2009

Good morning to the Chairman of the Board of Trustees Glenn Lewis, members of the Board of Trustees, the President, Dr. John M. Rudley, the chairman and members of the Texas Southern University Foundation, the faculty, distinguished guests, parents and friends, and most importantly, to the new graduates – **Hello Class of 2009!**

I am truly pleased to stand before you today as a TSU graduate and to have the privilege of being awarded an honorary doctorate degree.

Obviously, as a graduate of Texas Southern University to be recognized with an honorary doctoral degree is a moment of deep personal honor for me.

I hold Texas Southern University in the highest regard; this university provided me with the educational foundation that I needed to compete and to achieve professional success in my career.

As you know, a TSU TIGER proudly wears the maroon and gray. I am happy to celebrate with you. Being here takes me back to my old student days and reminds me of a joke that I once heard:

A college student called his mother and asked her for some money.

His mother said that she would send him money and mentioned that he had left his calculus book when he visited two weeks ago and asked if she should send it too.

“Uhh, ok, sure,” replied the student.

The mother wrapped the book along with the checks up in a package, kissed Dad goodbye, and went to the post office to mail the money and the book.

When she returned home, the father casually asked, “How much did you give him this time?”

The mother replied, “I wrote 2 checks, one for \$20, and the other for \$1000.”

“That’s \$1020!” the father yelled. “Are you crazy?”

“Don’t worry, hon,” the mother said, “I taped the \$20 check to the cover of his book, *but* I put the \$1000 check somewhere between the pages in Chapter 19.”

I am sure that no student, parent or relative– can relate to this situation!

Class of 2009 – this is your day!

And, since it is your day, I would like for each and every one of the graduates to stand up. Stand up right now where you are. Now, that you are standing...give yourselves a hand. You deserve it. You earned your degree today! Now, give your family members, extended family members, friends and honored guests a hand. This is to thank them for all that they did to get you to this day.

Today actually marks my third official visit to the university since late January and every time I step foot on the university’s grounds I am encouraged by the new spirit of renewal in large part due to Dr. John M. Rudley. As an alumnus, I can immediately see the impact of the new focused academic and business leadership approach of Dr. Rudley and his executive management team.

I am proud to be a part of the great changes taking place at TSU with the establishment of the Center for Global Trade based in the Jesse H. Jones School of Business.

This center will offer state-of-the art educational programming and scholarships in international business, to attract the nation’s premier faculty and students in the field. It is my hope and that of my family’s, that new TSU students will receive the education and training that they need to be competitive in the global marketplace.

In addition, as a port commissioner on the Port of Houston Authority, I was proud to announce a new \$2 million partnership to create the Maritime Transportation Management and Security Program.

By next year, TSU students will be able to enroll in the Maritime program to study for bachelor’s and master’s degrees in logistics, security and environment. I am grateful for the solid partnership and cooperation of my colleagues at the Port of Houston Authority, the largest foreign cargo port in the United States. They had the foresight and

the vision to establish a program of this type at Texas Southern University, the only one of its kind at a historically black university.

There is an unspoken pressure on all commencement speakers to provide sage advice at graduation ceremonies. Arguably, these are challenging times for American business and for industry management. So, for university graduates with their newly minted bachelor's, graduate and Ph.D degrees, I admit that it is not exactly the best time to enter the workforce.

My purpose today is to first of all wish you well on this your remarkable achievement today. Secondly, I hope to develop a good understanding of how to discover opportunities and meet the challenges that you will find in life.

In spite of the intensity of the times, we must recognize that we are in the dawn of a new era and what an exciting time it is. Two weeks ago we marked the first 100 days for President Barack Obama's administration. His election as President of the United States, the highest office in the land for the most powerful nation in the world was truly a remarkable achievement.

Our president represents the hopes and dreams of every American – the audacity of hope as he quantified it – to dream that one day, given his background that he could run one of the most disciplined political campaigns this country has ever seen by galvanizing the American electorate so much so that American politics will never be the same again. These hopes and dreams are what compel millions of people from all over the world to migrate to America.

And what is that dream? That dream is the desire of everyone to live up to their God given potential. It resonates in the minds of everyone who comes to these shores in search of a better life. These people from different backgrounds and cultures work to earn a decent wage to provide for their families. They all have as a common denominator the desire to succeed and to be a success.

Because of the richness of these experiences, I learned that you must honor your dreams. They are unique creatures that come to you in the quiet of the night, on our commutes to work or in the cadence of a young minister from Georgia, whose life and legacy continues to inspire the world.

As graduates of this great university, you are about to embark upon the world, a world that will undoubtedly be filled with triumphs, challenges and obstacles. Don't forget that these dreams are the main reason why you came to Texas Southern University. If you're anything like the student I was three decades ago, it was the dream and the hope of a better life which drew both you and me to this fine university for an education.

Without the academic commitment such as yours, we would not be able to attain the scientific, industrial, and economic advances that benefit all of humanity. Another benefit to being a college graduate is money. Quite simply, a typical college graduate earns more money than a high school graduate and can take advantage of more opportunities.

There are also other advantages also of being a college graduate. Higher education cultivates the mind. Higher education also provides for options in life. Options seed the soul with exposure and enlightenment. Options are the sign posts along the highway of life that signal a new stretch of road. Options help you to understand that there is not just one way, but many ways to achieve whatever goal or life plan that you set for yourself.

Trust me graduates:

- Learn this now
- Digest this now and
- Live this now.

This is perhaps the most important lesson that you will ever learn - you must understand that no matter where your path leads you, *never forget that you always have options in life*. Truly understanding the value of having options in life and of having the power to define yourself is a distinction that is both simple on its surface and far more complex as you dig deeper. People who recognize that they have options in life are people who invariably know that they and they alone are in charge of their lives.

You are the workforce of the now and the future, and as such, your skills and talents will dictate the vision for the new American workforce. Just within the last six months, you have witnessed an economic downturn and the credit crunch that followed.

You may be looking for a job now to pay back bills and student loans, let me encourage you to also consider entrepreneurship.

I look at today's market economy as an unbelievably great opportunity. The tables have turned –so think of it this way - what was up is now down and what was unattainable is now within reach. Within those parameters lay immeasurable possibilities for those individuals who are sharp-eyed, smart and strong.

Class of 2009:

- Be patient

- Be prepared, and

- Be resourceful.

I encourage you to find your own niche:

- Cultivate it,

- Promote it,

- Brand it.

People are always surprised when I tell them that success for me did not come easy. They forget that you don't start out at the top.

Success takes hard work and even greater concentration. You must:

1. develop a vision of where you want to go.

2. determine the means for realizing that vision from A to Z.

3. learn to not get distracted by people and experiences; and

4. perhaps more importantly, you must never lose sight of goal that you set for yourself.

These are the moments when you need to dig deep to persevere even in spite of tremendous odds and to call upon your faith - the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen. These are the moments when you will create your own big break.

Moreover, to know success, you must also know failure because each is inextricably linked. I don't say this lightheartedly, but rather, to provide balance and perspective for the life's seasoning that you will certainly need. Ralph Marston once said that "if you don't ever fail, then your goals are not nearly ambitious enough."

Well, Class of 2009, I have a news flash for you - you don't have any more excuses. We elected an African American to the highest political office in this land. Have we climbed the last mountaintop? No, but we are living history. As new TSU graduates, I encourage you to keep pressing forward with purpose, challenging yourselves and others to live up to their God given potential to build communities.

Before you lies a future full of hope and possibility, a little less daunting because of the great strides that we have made together as a society, but no less challenging. No matter what your discipline is or what you choose to do with your life, you represent the very best of all our hopes and dreams.

You are TSU's brand ambassadors, so **Represent!** Hold high the maroon and gray. As an alumnus of TSU, I am giving you the first post-graduate assignment and that assignment is to continue to participate in the life of this great university.

Texas Southern University needs you NOW! By contributing donations, your time and your talents, no matter how large or how small, and actively participating as a member of the National Alumni Association, you can help support the students coming behind you. I cannot stress to you how important this is. Who knows whether the next Barbara Jordon or Mickey Leland is sitting out there amongst you now?

So, what are your dreams for the future? What great things will you accomplish? Whatever they are, I wish you the absolute best on your journey. You have been prepared by TSU. I expect for you to fulfill your own destiny and to write your own book on the life that you want to lead and the contribution that you want to make to society.

In closing, I want to tell you a story. This is the story about a young man who ventured across the Atlantic Ocean far away from his ancestral home at the beginning of a quest for knowledge and education. There was much excitement about this big adventure for the young man, and there was certainly hesitation and apprehension from his family.

As the first in his family to seek knowledge and education in the United States, there was no one within the family unit to bring the word back, so to speak. The mother of this young man enthusiastically supported the decision, while the father reluctantly grew to appreciate the vision.

These parents over the years learned that they made the right decision. After several years of working for various employers, this young man was able, through the grace of God, to turn a small agricultural commodities trading business into a multi-national oil and gas exploration and production company.

Today, this company for the past eight years has ranks as the second largest African American-owned company in the United States, has been recognized by *Forbes Magazine* as one of the 400 top privately owned company in the United States, was the Company of the Year for *Black Enterprise Magazine* and just this past Thursday was named the 9th largest privately owned company in Houston by the *Houston Chronicle*.

That was my story. NOW, Class of 2009, you must go out there and write your own story.

Honor your dreams.

Be a TIGER.

TSU needs you NOW!

May God continue to bless and keep you.