

# Ellen DeGeneres to Headline Tulane University's 'Katrina Class' Commencement

February 16, 2009 12:45 PM

Mike Strecker  
[mstreck@tulane.edu](mailto:mstreck@tulane.edu)  
504-865-5210

New Orleans native Ellen DeGeneres, a twelve-time Emmy Award-winning stand-up comedian, actress and host of the popular talk show "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," will be the keynote speaker at Tulane University's 2009 Commencement, May 16 at 9 a.m. in the Louisiana Superdome.

"I am thrilled to be the keynote speaker for Tulane University's 2009 Commencement. I wish it were commencing sooner than it's going to commence. I have a lot to share with the class of 2009. Like, for instance, the many ways to use the word "commence,"" DeGeneres said.

"Ellen made a [cameo appearance](#) at our 2006 Commencement, which also featured former presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton. Ellen brought the house down. We've wanted to get her back ever since and are thrilled she said, "yes,"" Tulane President Scott Cowen said.

Cowen noted that DeGeneres is a natural fit for Tulane's commencement which, in addition to all the pomp and circumstance of a traditional graduation, features a distinctly New Orleans flavor with performances by Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band and jazz singer Wanda Rouzan, herald trumpets, a balloon drop, confetti cannons and a New Orleans second line procession.

"Ellen embodies Tulane's tradition of national prominence with deep New Orleans roots," Cowen said. "She never forgot New Orleans, especially after Katrina. I know she will be a highlight of our celebration. And when it comes time to second line, we all know she can dance."

Cowen plans to honor DeGeneres' commitment to New Orleans by presenting her with the Tulane University President's Medal. Established in 1999, the medal is awarded to individuals who have distinguished themselves and contributed to the well-being of Tulane University or the city of New Orleans. Past recipients include NBC Managing Editor and anchor Brian Williams, French President Jacques Chirac and former congresswoman and Ambassador to the Vatican Lindy Boggs.

This year's commencement will also have extra poignancy since it marks the graduation of the so-called "Katrina Class," who, as first-year students, were on campus only hours before they were forced to evacuate ahead of Hurricane Katrina. The storm flooded 70 percent of Tulane's campus, inflicted more than \$650 million in damages and caused the university to shut down for an entire semester, the first such occurrence since the Civil War.

"We thought we would be lucky if half of that freshman class returned when we re-opened the following spring. As it turned out more than 80 percent returned. It was at that time that I knew we would survive as an institution," Cowen said. "We will definitely have remembrances of that time and the courage and fortitude those kids, now fully grown men and women, showed. This is going to be a special day."