

University Commencement hits all the right notes

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Watch highlights from the 2019 Tulane University Commencement Ceremony, which featured Apple's Tim Cook as keynote speaker. (Video by Carolyn Scofield)

"Wherever you go, don't forget the lessons of this place," Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, told graduates at Tulane University Commencement on Saturday, May 18.

More than 3,000 candidates representing all 50 states, more than 50 countries, and each of the university's nine schools earned their academic degrees at the joyful and musical ceremony held in the Mercedes-Benz Superdome.

President Mike Fitts, who presided and conferred the degrees, noted in his remarks that Tulane Commencement is "a well-known musical event."

The ceremony included performances by Dr. Michael White and the Original Liberty Jazz Band and Topsy Chapman, who sang the classic, "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans."

Fitts called on Dr. White to demonstrate how one note — one person — is powerful. But when chords are played by musicians, something is created that "no one can create alone."

"When you attach your note — your uniqueness — to the uniqueness of others," said Fitts, "just hear what you can create from individual sounds — something bigger emerges. Something beautiful that would be impossible alone."

Cook, the keynote speaker, noted the "unmatched beauty" of New Orleans and that the city's "natural beauty, literary beauty, musical beauty, cultural beauty — seem to spring unexpectedly from the bayou."

He said, "The people of New Orleans used two tools to build this city: the *unlikely* and the *impossible*."

Cook cautioned the graduates: "Life will find lots of ways to tell you no, that you can't, that you shouldn't, that you'd be better off if you didn't try."

He offered lessons from his own life, telling how he went to work with Steve Jobs at Apple in 1998 when the company was near bankruptcy. But, he said, “Steve had a plan to change things. And I wanted to be part of it.”

It wasn’t just the iMac and the iPod, which came later, that drew Cook to Apple. “It was the values that brought those inventions to life,” he said. It was “the idea that putting powerful tools in the hands of everyday people helps unleash creativity and move humanity forward. That we can build things that help us imagine a better world, and then make it real.”

As the Tulane graduates go out into the world, Cook told them, “Summon the courage not just to hear, but to listen ... not just to act, but to act together. ...

“We owe it to each other to try.”

His call to action to the graduates: “From climate change to immigration, from criminal justice reform to economic opportunity, be motivated by your duty to build a better world.”

Echoing the Tulane motto, Cook said, “The audacious empathy of young people — the spirit that says we should live not just for ourselves but for our own — that’s the way forward.”

Also, he reminded the audience, that “young people have changed history, time and time again.”

The Class of 2019 Speaker, Abi Mbaye, carried on the theme of persevering and togetherness in diversity. “We should all walk away from this place knowing that our voices matter, our humanity matters, and we have a purpose in this world.”

At the ceremony, Tulane also bestowed honorary degrees on Cook and on Dean Baquet, executive editor of *The New York Times* and a New Orleans native; Blythe Danner, a Tony and Emmy award winner and environment, healthcare and cancer research activist; and John Lewis, an American civil rights leader and icon and current member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Georgia.