

Keynote speaker Ruby Bridges encourages Tulane's Class of 2021 to look to a brighter future

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Highlights from the Tulane University Class of 2021 Unified Commencement Ceremony, featuring keynote speaker Ruby Bridges, President Michael Fitts and student speakers Dylan Lucia and Andrea Ewalefo.

Tulane University saluted the Class of 2021 with a virtual Unified Commencement on Saturday featuring civil rights icon Ruby Bridges that had all the hallmarks of a classic Tulane graduation — inspiring speakers, rousing musical performances and a New Orleans second-line sendoff.

Bridges, who integrated New Orleans public schools as a first-grader in 1960, told graduates that history challenges everyone to meet the moment — no matter the obstacles in their path.

“Make no mistake about it, there came a time when I became aware of the hate that surrounded me as a child. Yet, the opportunity to change a system was more powerful,” she said.

Flanked by federal marshals, Bridges’ walk into her first day of classes at New Orleans’ William Frantz Elementary School was immortalized by painter Norman Rockwell. The iconic image of a little girl resolutely making history continues to inspire today.

“As a six-year-old child in November of 1960, I became familiar with a phrase that has been a part of my lifelong journey. To whom much has been given, much is required, and from that one, much more will be required,” Bridges said. “I was given a gift. An incredibly special gift. Knowing my journey, you might ask yourself, what gift comes packaged in hatred, and inequality, and bigotry? It is the gift of opportunity, and that is what my parents wanted for me because they did not have it — opportunity. You see, Class of 2021, opportunity comes packaged in many boxes and it often shows up with no return address. The sender is history, and she

does not accept returns. Once the package is opened, you accept the gift, and you embrace the demands attached to it.”

Tulane University President Michael Fitts awarded Bridges the Tulane President’s Medal for inspiring “generations of children to fearlessly pursue their dreams and generations of adults to reject hatred and bigotry.”

Tulane’s Unified Commencement celebrated this year’s 1,718 undergraduates and 1,296 graduate and professional students receiving degrees. The event capped off a year like no other, with the university holding on-ground classes with unprecedented safety precautions and a strict testing/contact tracing/isolation/quarantine regime due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Fitts called the graduating class the most tested in Tulane’s history — both literally and figuratively. (Tulanians took a half million COVID-19 tests this academic year to make in-person learning a reality.)

“Class of ’21, you are survivors. You are fighters. You’ve been through the crucible of a global pandemic. You’ve raised your voices in solidarity with racial equity. You’ve used this moment to catapult to something greater. You’ve discovered what you stand for, and what simply cannot stand. All the things that tested your bonds only managed to forge them and bring you closer together,” Fitts said. “The pandemic taught us that our fates are intertwined – that we have an obligation to others. How will you use that knowledge to solve the world’s biggest problems? How will you care for your community and revel in our shared humanity to make our world better?”

For the first time, the ceremony included two student speakers. Andrea Ewalefo shared her inspiring journey from a struggling single mother without a job almost a decade ago to earning two graduate degrees this year— a juris doctor from Tulane Law School and an MBA from the A.B. Freeman School of Business.

“I had no clue how I was going to dig myself out of these trenches, but I knew that I would spend the rest of my life working to give my son the quality of life he deserved. And I made a promise to myself that my son would grow up believing that he could accomplish whatever he wanted to accomplish in life because he saw his mamma do it first,” she said. “Seven short years later, and by this fall my son and I will move from being among the 11.8% of people living in poverty to being an attorney at a leading law firm. Absolutely nothing about this journey has been easy,

but every single day of it has been worth it.”

Dylan Lucia, who received a master’s degree in biomedical engineering from the School of Science and Engineering, challenged his classmates to remember the sense of adventure they learned at Tulane. For him, it started by embracing the unfamiliar — his first bite of an alligator entrée.

“As we are about to begin this next chapter in our lives, I hope you’ll take time to think about the changes you’re going to make in the world. I hope you seek out challenges that help you better yourself and those around you. I hope you strive to learn new things,” Lucia said. “And when life hands you an alligator, take a bite!”

The ceremony also included performances by Dr. Michael White and the Original Liberty Jazz Band, Yolanda Windsay and local jam band Galactic, who performed “Clap Your Hands” from legendary New Orleans music venue Tipitina’s.

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Ruby Bridges





President Michael Fitts with keynote speaker Ruby Bridges (center) and student speakers Dylan Lucia (left) and Andrea Ewalefo (right). Photo by Paula Burch Celentano.

A Commencement second-line umbrella featuring an homage to the iconic Norman Rockwell painting of Ruby Bridges on her way to school.