

Emmy Award Winning Actress Sheryl Lee Ralph to address Tulane graduates

April 04, 2025 9:00 AM Tulane Today
today@tulane.edu



Sheryl Lee Ralph, an electrifying performer and powerful orator whose acceptance speech at the 2022 Emmy Awards went viral, will bring her wit, wisdom and passion as the keynote speaker at Tulane's 2025 Commencement in Caesars Superdome.

Over the past 40 years, entertainment icon Sheryl Lee Ralph has gained international acclaim for her unforgettable roles in comedy, drama and musicals — all while working as an advocate for HIV/AIDS awareness, as well as for teachers like the one she portrays on the hit ABC series "Abbott Elementary."

At 6 p.m. on Saturday, May 17, Ralph, an electrifying performer and powerful orator whose acceptance speech at the 2022 Emmy Awards went viral, will bring her wit, wisdom and passion as the keynote speaker at Tulane's 2025 Commencement in Caesars Superdome.

"Sheryl Lee Ralph epitomizes the spirit of Tulane as a standout student committed to excellence throughout her multi-disciplined career, as well as in her tireless service to others," Tulane President Michael A. Fitts said. "From Broadway to film to television, Sheryl has done it all, creating characters that transcend the cultural moment to offer deeper insights into the human experience."

Ralph, who portrays veteran teacher Barbara Howard on "Abbott Elementary," has starred in countless projects across television, film and stage. For her work on "Abbott Elementary," she won the 2022 Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series, along with Critics' Choice and Independent Spirit awards. She received second and third Emmy nominations in 2023 and 2024 for the same role, and the show has garnered numerous other accolades, including AFI Awards, Critics' Choice Awards, Golden Globes, NAACP Image Awards, SAG Awards and a Peabody Award. Ralph also received five NAACP Image Award nominations for her work in more than 100 episodes of UPN's "Moesha."

Born in Waterbury, Conn., the daughter of a college professor and Jamaican fashion designer, Ralph was raised between Jamaica and Long Island. She was one of the first women admitted to Rutgers College and, at 19, became the youngest woman to graduate from Rutgers University. She was also named as one of the top 10 College Women in America by Glamour Magazine.

Ralph's breakthrough in acting came with the role of Deena Jones in the original Broadway production of "Dreamgirls," which earned her Tony and Drama Desk Award nominations. She later originated the role of Muzzy Van Hossmer in "Thoroughly Modern Millie" and made history as the first African American to play Madame Morrible in the Broadway production of "Wicked."

Ralph's film career began in 1977 alongside Sidney Poitier in "A Piece of the Action." This led to work with some of Hollywood's biggest names, including Denzel Washington, Robert De Niro, Danny Glover, Eddie Murphy and Whoopi Goldberg. Her performance in "To Sleep with Anger" earned her an Independent Spirit Award for Best Supporting Actress. Last year, Ralph starred in "The Fabulous Four" alongside

Susan Sarandon, Bette Midler and Megan Mullally, and most recently the independent film "Ricky" which made a big splash at the 2025 Sundance Film Festival.

In 1990, she founded The DIVA Foundation, as a memorial and life-long pledge to the many friends she had lost to HIV/AIDS. The foundation is committed to achieving better health outcomes for all people through innovative programming using the transformative power of the arts. Their signature fundraising event, Divas Simply Singing! Raising Health Awareness, is the longest consecutively running HIV/AIDS and Health Awareness benefit concert in the United States. For this advocacy, Ralph was appointed as an AIDS Ambassador for Jamaica's Ministry of Health and recently received the prestigious Honorary Order of Jamaica for her contribution as an actress and cultural ambassador of Jamaica.

Constantly expanding the means of sharing her story and wisdom with others, Ralph published "DIVA 2.0: Life Lessons From Me For You!" in 2023. She also wrote, directed and produced the award-winning short film "Secrets" co-starring Alfre Woodard and Robin Givens. She was the producer for the documentary short "Unexpected," which was nominated for a Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Daytime Special.

Ralph will serve as the keynote speaker at a Tulane Commencement that is returning to Caesars Superdome for the first time since 2019. Renowned as one of the nation's most festive and unique graduation exercises, Tulane's 2025 Commencement will feature all the academic pageantry of a traditional university graduation paired with New Orleans flavor and flair, including live jazz, herald trumpets, confetti cannons, a traditional New Orleans second-line procession and more.