

Lights, camera, action on the Tulane Class of 2025

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During the Unified Commencement Ceremony in the Caesars Superdome on Saturday, May 17, which featured a keynote address by entertainment icon Sheryl Lee Ralph, President Michael A. Fitts used the power of film to remind graduates that life is filled with challenge, emotion and the thrill of the unknown. (Photo by Cheryl Gerber)

Tulane University's Class of 2025 marked the closing scene of their college careers and the opening credits of a story yet to be written as they second-lined, danced and celebrated their achievements Saturday, May 17, during a Hollywood-themed Unified Commencement ceremony that featured one of today's biggest stars.

The milestone event was the culmination of three days of celebration that included individual school diploma ceremonies, as well as hooding and awards ceremonies. This year's Unified Commencement was held for the first time since 2019 in the Caesars Superdome, which has been the event's home since 1999, but had been unavailable for the past five years due to off-season renovations at the iconic venue.

With more than 2,000 graduates in attendance and more than 11,000 family and friends looking on, Tulane President Michael A. Fitts used the power of film to remind graduates that life is filled with challenge, emotion and the thrill of the unknown and that their Tulane experience has more than prepared them for the world that awaits them.

Fitts' speech was the perfect lead-in to the keynote address by Emmy Award-winning actress Sheryl Lee Ralph, who told graduates how honored she was to serve as Commencement speaker for such an impressive university.

"When I told my cast members at 'Abbott Elementary,' Quinta (Brunson, the show's creator and lead actress) said, 'Oh my God, Tulane. It's not just a university. It's a special place.'

"That's when I realized Tulane isn't just a school. It's a living, breathing testament to resilience, innovation, and the power of community," Ralph added. "And today, I have the immense joy of speaking to the unstoppable, unshakable, undeniable Class of 2025."

To kick off his address, Fitts welcomed Tulane's mascot Riptide to the stage, calling him one of the best directors in the business and assigning him the task of showing clips on two large screens from films chosen by Fitts to demonstrate meaningful life lessons.

"I hope you're ready for your close-up, because you are a star and this is your world premiere," Fitts told graduates.

Of the 2015 animated movie “Inside Out,” Fitts said it “reminds us to seek the light in the darkest moments and embrace the intricacies of our emotions.”

“As you navigate careers, adventures, misfortunes and triumphs, your Tulane family will be right there with you no matter how far apart you are,” Fitts said.

Turning to the film “Apollo 13,” Fitts told graduates that while they will make mistakes along the way, it’s how they confront those mistakes that will define their character and perseverance.

“Though you may not have to rescue astronauts in outer space, you will undoubtedly face challenges in your years after Tulane,” Fitts said. “But when you’re confronted with a problem of galactic proportions, sometimes the answer will be to think small, to use or rethink everyday things in a new and novel way.”

Showing an eerie underwater scene from the movie “Jaws,” Fitts reminded graduates that while the film was a blockbuster that audiences still enjoy 50 years later, it did not start out that way.

“The production of ‘Jaws’ was a notorious disaster,” he said. “It was painfully over-budget. It was way behind schedule. And most of all, there were problems with the shark.”

But, Fitts noted, director Steven Spielberg overcame the failures by getting creative.

“The lesson here is clear: even something that appears to have gone horribly wrong can become a huge success,” Fitts said. “The difference is persistence. Keep going. If what you planned isn’t working, you don’t necessarily need to change your goal. You may just need to find a different way to get there. Failure doesn’t have to be final. It can be a detour, a strategic pause or an all-out inspiration.”

In her rousing keynote address, Ralph challenged graduates to put their Tulane education to meaningful use — whether in medicine, public health, engineering, the arts or any other pursuit — urging them to lead with integrity and courage.

“The world needs people who will raise their hand and raise their voice,” Ralph said. “People who follow their moral compass. Who celebrate our differences and stand up

for the least among us. The world needs people like you.”

She left students with a stirring reminder of their worth and potential: “Please, don’t shrink to fit into places that can’t handle your brilliance. Don’t edit yourself to make others comfortable — not for your friends, not for your family, not for anyone.”

After her speech, Fitts presented Ralph with the Tulane President’s Medal, noting that the award is “for those who inspire us with their contributions to the well-being and success of Tulane and the world — those who move us to act, to think, to lead — and to make the world a better place.”

Over the past 40 years, Ralph has gained international acclaim for her memorable 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 in "Abbott Elementary."

In the show, Ralph portrays veteran teacher Barbara Howard, a role for which she won the 2022 Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Comedy Series, along with a Critics’ Choice award and a Film Independent Spirit Award nomination. Ralph received a second and third Emmy nomination in 2023 and 2024 for the same role, and the show has garnered numerous other accolades, including AFI Awards, Golden Globes, NAACP Image Awards, SAG Awards and a Peabody Award. In April, Ralph received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Graduate Devin Goldman shared a powerful message of perseverance and connection as student speaker. A psychology and health & wellness major from New York, Goldman overcame personal loss while embracing campus life through service, mentorship and a key supporting role with the Green Wave football team. Her speech reflected the deep love she developed for Tulane and the community that supported her journey.

Goldman challenged graduates to use their Tulane experience to make the world a better place. Fear and doubt are normal, she said, but even those kinds of feelings can be used as opportunities to “redefine the type of person that we choose to be in this unpredictable, beautiful world.”

“Will we let the bitterness of our circumstances diffuse our negativity? Or will we use

gratitude and perspective to be understanding, influential, audacious?” Goldman asked the crowd.

Goldman said she had her own share of challenges over the past four years and knows what it’s like to experience — and overcome — adversity, including the loss of loved ones. She mentioned the names of three Tulanians who passed away before graduating from Tulane and “who should be with us today” — Lindsay Wiener, Caleb Connor and Ralph Adedeji.

“Embrace the challenges that we have faced,” Goldman said. “And acknowledge that we have not even touched the tip of our successes. We are learning. Changing. Thriving. And now, the world awaits us.”

She added, “My message to you is simple: While the world around us tries to fit us into boxes and form us into what it wants, remember who you are. Remember your story. Use it. Lean on the people around you. Trust yourself. Be audacious. And spread your joy.”

Besides student achievement, the ceremony also honored outstanding faculty with annual teaching awards. The 2025 President’s Awards for Excellence in Graduate and Professional Teaching went to Catherine O’Connor, professor in the School of Social Work, and Randy Sparks, professor of history in the School of Liberal Arts. The recipients of the 2025 Suzanne and Stephen Weiss Presidential Fellowship for Undergraduate Education were Jacquelyn Thoni Howard, professor of practice and associate director of the Connolly Alexander Institute for Data Science, and Katherine Raymond, senior professor of practice in the School of Science and Engineering.

The ceremony was filled with New Orleans flair and celebration throughout. It opened with an academic procession of graduates and faculty making their way to their seats as Dr. Michael White and his Original Liberty Jazz Band provided the soundtrack. In true New Orleans style, the evening’s final send-off included second-lining, confetti cannons, live jazz and Mardi Gras beads as graduates paraded with dazzling green and blue umbrellas emblazoned with their own creative designs. Graduates were given the parasols — plain and unadorned — at the start of their Tulane career, and asked to bring them back — personalized and decorated with memorabilia from their Tulane journey — for Commencement.

