

Ellen DeGeneres to Headline "Katrina Class" Commencement

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New Orleans native Ellen DeGeneres, a 12-time Emmy Award-winning stand-up comedian, actress and host of television's "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," will be the keynote speaker at the 2009 Tulane University Commencement on May 16 in the Louisiana Superdome.



At the 2006 Tulane commencement, comedian Ellen DeGeneres, center, second lines across the stage along with President Scott Cowen, left, to the music of jazz band leader Michael White, right. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

"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.

Tulane President Scott Cowen announced the return of New Orleans native DeGeneres to the commencement stage.

“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.'”

Cowen noted that DeGeneres is a natural fit for the Tulane commencement, which, in addition to all the pomp and circumstance of a traditional graduation, features a distinctly New Orleans flavor. Performing at the ceremony for graduates and their families will be Dr. Michael White's Original Liberty Jazz Band and jazz singer Wanda Rouzan, as well as the excitement of 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, former French President Jacques Chirac and former congresswoman and Ambassador to the Vatican Lindy Boggs.

This year's commencement ceremony, which begins at 9 a.m., also will 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 the Tulane 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 reopened the following spring,” Cowen said. “As it turned out, more than 80 percent returned. It was at that time that I knew we would survive as an institution.”

During the May 16 ceremony, he added, “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.”