



**National  
Urban League**

**To Be Equal #19**

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**Class of 2013: Summon the Courage, Choose to Serve and Live with Compassion**

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*"Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are...for all the land that you see I will give to you." Genesis 13: 14-15*

University commencement season is a time of high hopes and great celebration. I was again reminded of that this past Saturday when I delivered the commencement address at Huston-Tillotson (HT) University in Austin, Texas. This coming weekend, I will also speak during graduation ceremonies at Tuskegee University and Alcorn State.

Perhaps best known as the university where Jackie Robinson served as athletic director and basketball coach before he set out to break the color barrier in baseball, Huston-Tillotson is the oldest Historically Black College and University (HBCU) west of the Mississippi. For 137 years, it has opened doors of educational opportunity that might have otherwise been closed to many African American students. The enthusiasm and optimism I saw in the faces of this year's HT graduates – and that I expect to see at Tuskegee and Alcorn – reaffirmed my belief that the future is indeed in good hands.

My message to the graduates was simply to make sure that in addition to emerging from college academically prepared, they should also embrace their obligation to pave the way for the next generation and leave this world better than they found it. I am all too aware that this is easier said than done. So, I also shared three key observations, or better yet life lessons, to help them navigate this next phase of their journey. I call them the three C's – courage, choice and compassion.

The class of 2013 is graduating at a pivotal moment in American history. Fifty years ago, from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Dr. Martin Luther King shared his passionate dream that America live up to its promise of liberty and justice for all. That same year four little Black girls were killed by a terrorist bomb planted by the Ku Klux Klan at Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church, and civil rights hero Medgar Evers was assassinated in the driveway of his home in Jackson, Mississippi. Now 50 years later, we have witnessed the second inauguration of the nation's first Black president. As I told the HT graduates, we've come a long way baby, but we still have a long way to go.

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While many of the legal impediments to equal opportunity have been eliminated over the past half-century, new challenges including voter suppression, criminal justice abuses, economic inequality and opposition to common sense gun safety legislation, have risen to take their place. All of these problems will require this generation of graduates to muster the kind of courage shown by people like Jackie Robinson, Texas Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, and National Urban Leaguer Heman Sweatt, who fought the battle to integrate the University of Texas in 1950. They each found the courage and made the choice to devote themselves to a cause greater than themselves. They each demonstrated the kind of compassion required to act beyond individual interests and clear obstacle-laden paths so that those who followed could have better opportunities. The baton is now passing to a new generation, and I have no doubt they will rise to the challenge.

The National Urban League has always engaged young people in our empowerment movement. For more than 40 years, our Black Executive Exchange Program (BEEP) has been cultivating new leaders and inspiring achievement by enabling African American students to interface and network with African American business professionals to prepare for careers in corporate America. In addition, the National Urban League Young Professionals (NULYP) engages young professionals ages 21-40 in voluntarism and philanthropy to empower their communities and change lives.

Many of today's HBCU graduates have been touched by those and similar efforts. We expect that they will use the blueprint of courage, choice and compassion summoned and shown by so many before them. We expect that they will pass it on and choose to serve.

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