

A Capitol Commencement

*First Lady Urges Class of 2010,
“Keep Going. Keep Giving. Keep Engaging.”*

First lady Michelle Obama lit up the stage at The George Washington University's 2010 Commencement, delivering an inspiring keynote address against the majestic backdrop of the U.S. Capitol. More than 25,000 GW graduates, friends, and families gathered on the historic National Mall for the joyous celebration—capping an ambitious university-wide year of service sparked by Mrs. Obama.





First lady Michelle Obama delivered an inspiring keynote address to the Class of 2010 and received an honorary Doctor of Public Service degree.



The U.S. Capitol provided the backdrop for Commencement 2010. GW is the only university in the country to hold commencement on the National Mall—a tradition extending back to 1992.

“Eight months ago...I promised that if you performed 100,000 hours of service for the greater Washington community this school year, that I’d come and speak at your commencement,” Mrs. Obama said. “Well, I am a woman of my word. Congratulations on this remarkable achievement! Thank you for the incredible contributions that you’ve made to the lives of so many people.”

GW President Steven Knapp, who conferred an honorary Doctor of Public Service degree upon the first lady prior to her passionate 30-minute address, presented a short video chronicling the year of service and announced that the GW community had far surpassed Mrs. Obama’s challenge goal. “Working together, our students, faculty, and staff were able to exceed the high standard you set, completing 163,980 hours of service and proudly earning the right to host you as our commencement speaker,” Dr. Knapp said.

The first lady, who received thunderous applause throughout her speech, called the Class of 2010 “extraordinary” and joked that if she had known that more than 3,300 hours would be clocked on the first day of the challenge, she’d have chosen a higher target. “More impressive than the fact that you did it was really how you did it,” the first lady said. “For every ill of this interconnected world, you’ve tried to find a way to make good. Where there’s hate, you’ve tried to heal it. Where there’s need, you’ve tried to fill it. Where there’s devastation, you’ve tried to rebuild it.”

She urged the newly minted graduates to take their service global and to “Keep going. Keep giving. Keep engaging.” “When you serve others abroad, you’re serving our country, too,” she explained. “You’re showing the world the true face of America—our generosity, our strength, the enduring power of our ideals, the infinite reservoir of our hope.”

“I’m asking your generation to be America’s face to the world,” she said. “It will make the world safer, it will make America stronger, and it will make you more competitive...In the end, the simple act of opening your mind and engaging abroad—whether it’s in the heart of campus or in the most remote villages—can change your definition of what’s possible.”

Meeting the Challenge

It was an offer that GW simply could not refuse. On Sept. 11, 2009, during the first National Day of Service, first lady Michelle Obama issued a challenge to the GW community: complete 100,000 hours of community service this academic year and she’d serve as the university’s commencement speaker.

Students, faculty members, and staff members quickly rolled up their sleeves and got to work. Over the next eight months, more than 3,800 members of the GW community joined together in a wide range of service projects—from rebuilding homes in New Orleans to revitalizing a D.C. high school on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January.

Students immediately got to work on Sept. 11—GW’s Freshman Day of Service—with students logging 3,365 hours through projects in all eight wards of Washington. Participants assembled thousands of care packages for the troops, wrote letters to the families of fallen soldiers, helped elderly veterans clean up their homes, painted schools, and collected trash in the Anacostia Watershed.

Martin Luther King Jr. Day was a day on, not a day off, at GW, as more than 550 students, faculty and staff members, and alumni came together to clean, paint, and refurbish Roosevelt High School in northwest D.C. More than 160 GW students and staff members hosted some 200 D.C. senior citizens for dinner and dancing in February at the eighth annual Senior Prom at the Marvin Center. One hundred GW students hosted Jump Start for a Day in May, bringing more than 300 D.C. preschool children from low-income families to the Mount Vernon Campus for a day of fun-filled activities. The students worked with the national nonprofit throughout the year, tutoring and mentoring the young children.

The highest number of community service hours was logged through DC Reads—with 432 GW students racking up 29,574 hours

Freshmen came out in force to sort food at the Capital Area Food Bank and perform myriad other projects throughout Washington during the Freshman Day of Service Sept. 11, kicking off a year of service that culminated in Michelle Obama’s commencement speech.





Gina Fernandez, BA '08, MA '10, was one of more than 550 members of the GW community who came together to clean, paint, and refurbish Roosevelt High School in northwest D.C. on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in January.

tutoring children in D.C. elementary schools. Nearly 350 members of the GW community performed 13,160 service hours through 13 Alternative Winter and Spring Break programs around the country and in Central and South America, giving up coveted vacation time to help tackle poverty and rebuild communities. Some 700 GW students volunteered at 46 community partner sites through the Neighbors' Project, amassing 11,083 service hours in a variety of service activities, from environmental sustainability to adult education and workforce development.

Many students served individually, as well, on a wide range of meaningful projects. GW doctoral candidate in public administration Laura Olson, for example, volunteered 1,297 hours this year addressing social vulnerability and community recovery in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans.

"Service gives me great hope and a sense of my own ability to shape the world around me," says Ms. Olson, who is a research scientist at GW's Institute for Crisis, Disaster & Risk Management. "Hurricane Katrina really tore at me in a special way. If you can do something to make a difference, why wouldn't you? And when you discover a passion for service, you very quickly experience that it is not you that gives, but that instead, you receive."

Throughout the year, GW provided monthly service updates and tallies to the first lady. "Your [monthly service update] letters were filled with wonderful stories of holding food drives and beautifying parks and making care packages for our troops," Mrs. Obama said during her commencement address. "More than 200 of you took your winter breaks abroad—building a

GW students and D.C. preschoolers amuse themselves with oobleck, the green slimy substance made famous in Dr. Seuss's Bartholemew & the Oobleck, during Jump Start for a Day.

school in Guatemala, a community center in Peru, comforting the sick in Ecuador. You helped your neighbors in Foggy Bottom dig out after 'Snowmageddon.' You have fully joined a generation of activists and doers. You guys can't be stopped. You don't know the meaning of the word can't."

GW President Steven Knapp said he never doubted the university would meet the first lady's challenge. "Public service has been a hallmark of the university ever since [it] was first envisioned by one of the founding public servants of our nation, George Washington," he said. "This is in our blood; it's part of our DNA; it's going to be something we're forever committed to." The president and his wife, Diane Robinson Knapp, served hand-in-hand with the GW community, along with the members of the board of trustees.

"It was truly a university-wide effort and an inspirational and transformational experience for everyone who participated," says Helen Cannaday Saulny, MA '88, associate vice president for student and academic support services, who co-chaired the committee spearheading the challenge.

She lauds GW's Office of Community Service for "a tremendous job" overseeing logistics for the gargantuan effort—from organizing and coordinating service activities to tracking and auditing hours through VounteerMatch, a custom-designed online system. "A huge amount of credit goes to them, as well as to our amazing students," Ms. Cannaday Saulny says. "It was a remarkable year filled with unbelievable energy and excitement, and the values of empathy, compassion, and humility were ever present. We could not have asked for a better challenge to rally behind."

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GW President Steven Knapp shakes first lady Michelle Obama's hand following her address to the Class of 2010.

Joining Mrs. Obama on the podium as honorary degree recipients were legendary jazz pianist and composer Dave Brubeck, who was awarded a Doctor of Music degree, and prominent engineer and entrepreneur A. James Clark, chairman and CEO of Clark Enterprises Inc., who received a Doctor of Engineering degree.

Many members of the GW community were recognized during the ceremony for their exceptional contributions to the university. Three faculty members won Oscar and Shoshana Trachtenberg Prizes for excellence: Bruce Dickson, professor of political science and international affairs; John Lachin, professor of epidemiology and biosta-

tistics; and Honey Nashman, associate professor of human services and sociology.

This year's recipients of the coveted George Washington Award for service were Larrie Greenberg, clinical professor of pediatrics; Brian Hawthorne, BA '10, president of GW Veterans Organization; Rachelle Heller, associate dean for academic affairs at GW's Mount Vernon Campus; and Judith Plotz, professor of English. The 2010 Manatt-Trachtenberg Prize recognizing undergraduate leadership was presented to Amanda Jo Formica, BA '10.

In his charge to the graduates, Dr. Knapp encouraged the students to "keep alive" their spirit, their creativity, their



JESSICA MCCORMICK

Student speaker Zoe Petkanas, BA '10, regaled the crowd with her reflections on life at GW and urged her classmates to "find their passion."




Legendary jazz pianist and composer Dave Brubeck received an honorary Doctor of Music degree at the ceremony.

academic curiosity, and their commitment to service. “You are our future,” he said. “We depend on you to repair what earlier generations have broken, to build what we have left unbuilt, to learn what we have not yet learned, to heal what we have so far left unhealed.”

Student speaker Zoe Petkanas, BA '10, engaged the crowd with her reflections on life at GW. “On my way to my first college class, I somehow wound up on Pennsylvania Avenue watching the presidential motorcade roar past,” she said. “And at that moment, I knew that GW was not going to be a typical college experience. We joke about entering the real world after graduation. But we’ve been in the real world since the day we got here.”

The Elliott School graduate, who is spending the summer in Oman on a State Department Critical Language Scholarship, encouraged her classmates to find what motivates them. “Find your passion, be bold, and do good,” she said. “I can’t wait to see what we accomplish!”

The festivities, televised live on ABC 7 in Washington, capped five days of university-wide commencement events—ranging from individual school and college celebrations to the Phi Beta Kappa induction and doctoral hooding ceremonies. Keynote speakers at the school ceremonies included Rose Gottemoeller, MA '81, assistant secretary of state for verification, compliance, and implementation, who spoke at the Elliott School’s celebration, and Mary L. Schapiro, JD '80, the 29th chairman of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, who delivered the address at the Law School ceremony.

Mrs. Obama was the third first lady in GW history to speak at commencement. Former first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton delivered the 1994 address, and former first lady Barbara Bush shared the podium with her husband in 2006. GW is the only university in the country to hold commencement on the National Mall—a tradition extending back to 1992. 



SEC Chair Mary L. Schapiro, JD '80, served as the keynote speaker at the Law School Diploma Ceremony. A number of other distinguished GW alumni addressed graduates at commencement weekend festivities: Ric Duques, BBA '65, MBA '69, spoke at the Business School's undergraduate celebration; Rose Gottemoeller, MA '81, assistant secretary of state for verification, compliance, and implementation, keyed the Elliott School of International Affairs' celebration; and Marcia Bullard, MBA '01, former president and chief executive officer of USA Weekend magazine, addressed students at the Business School graduate celebration.



Washington construction entrepreneur A. James Clark, chairman and CEO of Clark Enterprises Inc., received a Doctor of Engineering degree at the ceremony.