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[Home](#) > President Sirleaf Delivers Commencement Address to Umass Medical Graduates

President Sirleaf Delivers Commencement Address to Umass Medical Graduates

Embassy of the Republic of Liberia in the United States , Fri, Jun 8, 2012

(WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS – Sunday, June 3, 2012): The University of Massachusetts Medical School (UMMS), the state's only public academic health sciences institution, on Sunday held its 39th Commencement Ceremony, awarding degrees to a graduating class of 253 that included 66 from the Graduate School of Nursing, 67 from the Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and 112 from the School of Medicine.

The UMMS also conferred honorary degrees upon three distinguished personalities. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, who delivered the Commencement Address, received an honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters *honoris causa*, as did Boston entrepreneur and cystic fibrosis activist, Mr. Joseph O'Donnell. The United States Surgeon General, Dr. Regina Benjamin, received an honorary Doctor of Science Degree.



Chancellor of the Medical School, Dr. Michael F. Collins officiated at the Ceremony, while the President of the University of Massachusetts, Dr. Robert L. Caret, made remarks. The Board of Trustees, faculty and staff of the Medical School were in full attendance.

In her Address, President Sirleaf thanked the Trustees of the University of Massachusetts for the invitation to deliver this year's Medical School Commencement Address, saying that while the School honored her by the invitation, it is the people of Liberia, whom this institution continues to support, who are forever in their debt. She mentioned the very close bonds between Liberia and UMMS, because so many of its students and faculty have taken time away from their own lives to travel to Liberia and provide life-saving medical care to ensure a healthy population.

Addressing the Class of 2012 on the topic, "The Road Ahead," President Sirleaf told the graduates that they would go on to greatly impact the lives of families and health policy the world over. Most of you are citizens of the world's largest economy and its most powerful country, she observed. As such, you will have a potential to impact globally. Use it wisely, for with so much power comes great responsibility.

Said the President: “I wish I could say that the most demanding days of your chosen profession are behind you, and that it gets easier from here on out. But to say that, as you well know, would be untrue. For with each accomplishment come expectations and assumptions. There will be days that will test your commitment to this calling. I am, however, confident that the same perseverance that brought you this far will see you through.”

The President went on to describe Liberia’s latest journey, which began a little over six years ago when she came into office. “The economy was in ruins, and our health sector, like all others, was not spared the destruction that engulfed the country during the civil upheaval. The health infrastructure – hospitals, health centers and clinics – was destroyed or badly damaged, and the delivery of basic health services was almost non-existent.” In more ways than one, she said, “we inherited a wounded country, with dysfunctional institutions. Far beyond the physical destruction and deprivation, we inherited a house that had been divided against itself. Liberia stood in dire need of healing.”

The spirit, aspirations and hopes of our country had been tested by the long civil conflict, the President continued. The scale and scope of the challenges were daunting and, in the midst of it all, sometimes we felt distracted and were tempted to lose sight of what mattered: that the restoration would take time; that the healing would take years, if not decades. The noise of life attempted to crowd out the “big picture”.

The President noted, “You are the counterpoint to the pain of the world. After today, your presence will bring comfort and assurance to the distraught family member, the ailing patient, the anxious spouse and the frantic parent. It will be hard, sometimes, but always come back to the big picture – the big picture of your chosen profession – the preservation of life. Beyond the diseases and other ailments that you cure, mitigate and alleviate, your profession fulfills a huge need – healing – and that is the big picture.”

“In the face of pain, shame, indignity, suffering and sorrow, there is a need for healing in the world, a need for hope, and that is what you represent. That is the calling you chose. Your very presence softens the severity of the pain of disease, validates life and soothes the pain. The world will need you – specifically for your profession, but generally for what you stand for. That is your big picture.”

The President called upon the graduates to do the unrequited good deed, no matter how small. This was important for two reasons: you never know the returns from a beneficiary of the unrequited good. On a more basic level, the good reaffirms our humanity and strengthens the bonds that hold us together. As medical professionals, she said, you will always be held in high esteem. People will respect you, and look up to you, and will emulate your good example. So, do well – be kind, especially when the beneficiary cannot reciprocate.

President Sirleaf said that UMMS, through the Health Education and Relief Through Teaching (HEARTT) Program, has contributed many, many doctors that have gone to Liberia in recent years and have made a difference by providing relief and healthcare services at our main referral hospital, the John F. Kennedy Medical Center. UMMS has been especially involved in the Pediatric Program by providing a pediatrician almost every month to JFK for the last three years at almost no expense to Liberia.

Like others, said the Liberian leader, “These doctors have continued to render humanitarian service without monetary reward to the thousands that cannot pay for this service. It would have been impossible to imagine the

strides we have made in our health sector without the kindness of the people whom we can never repay.... This has been achieved through partnerships with friendly governments, universities like yours, non-profit and church organizations. We are also investing in the potential of our people by training them to assume responsibility for health sector delivery.”

The progress indicators of interactive operations can sometimes lead to frustration, said President Sirleaf, citing a recent report by *The Economist* which published figures indicating that Liberia’s infant mortality had increased. “What we came to realize is that the numbers were not so much going up as our reporting mechanisms were improving,” she pointed out. After two decades of no accurate data on the state of our health sector, we began collecting information. We conducted a National Census, and improved data collection and reporting exposed the extent of our problems. As difficult as it is to face these numbers, it was a necessary first step toward improving the quality of life of our people. Yet, the realities are there and they remain shocking. Although down from 26 percent, 16 percent of our children die at birth, and some 700 of 100,000 mothers also die giving birth.”

The next step comes from better education in the various remedies, the President said – in the use of bed nets, and better practices in accessing clean water and sanitation. This also means addressing the practices of traditional birth attendants who require better training and appropriate use of the referral system.

President Sirleaf said that while Liberia has a long way to go, it has, inarguably, come from an even longer way. She added: “We are investing in the potential of our people, formulating the roadmap, and establishing the processes, systems and institutions that will allow us to reach our ambitious goal of becoming a middle-income country by the year 2030. We are pleased to have been recognized and received praise, as Liberia is today considered a model of how a failed state can be restored to the family of nations. I am also pleased to say that Liberia is an open society, where our laws ensure no discrimination against anyone.”

However, all of these achievements only make sense against the background of our previous, colossal failures, President Sirleaf stated. Everything we have done right is polar opposite of what we did wrong in the preceding decades.

She told the graduates that failure matters, not only in the lessons we learn from them, but in the options they close off and what they tell us about ourselves. Those who pursue success must also be familiar with failure. Success blinds us to the struggles that came before.

On a personal level, the President said that, sometimes, in the wake of her relative success, people forget how she got there. “Where I am today, and who I have become, was not always a foregone conclusion. My life has had its peaks and its valleys. Today I am President; yesterday, I was a prisoner forced into exile. I was not always certain how each episode would end, but I never gave up. Uncertainty is crucial to the human condition; some of the most important decisions occur in moments of great uncertainty. To be without doubt is to escape an inevitable human limitation. To maintain a healthy skepticism is a virtue, even about the ideas in which you strongly believe. But whatever the circumstances, we must have the courage to be brave in action.”

In conclusion, the Commencement Speaker said this to the Graduates of 2012: “You have come further than most people will in a lifetime. Cherish that accomplishment. Today, take a break from your journey and celebrate. Tomorrow, it will be time to begin another phase, another stage, in preparation for another rite of

passage.

“As you graduate and go forth into the world, use your knowledge and skills; continue to make a difference, for that is your calling. Along the road, remember to protect the big picture, because your sense of purpose and meaning is bound to matter. As I always say to graduates, seek at all times to preserve what is best about humanity and reduce what is worst among us. As doctors, I know that each of you has read Atul Gawande’s *The Checklist Manifesto*, which helps you in your profession, medical or otherwise, to avoid mistakes. Class of 2012: Go out and save the world!”

Following the Commencement Ceremony, President Sirleaf and entourage departed Massachusetts.

See Photo gallery for more phoros of this event

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