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Barack Obama

Commencement Speech at Kalamazoo Central High School

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Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Please be seated. Hello, Giants. It is good -- It is good to be here, and congratulations Class of 2010. I am honored to be part of this special occasion.

Audience Member: We love you!

President Obama: And I love you back. Let me acknowledge your extraordinary governor, Jennifer Granholm. Superintendent Rice, thank you for your inspiring words. Your mayor, Bobby Hopewell, who I understand is a proud Kalamazoo graduate himself.

Thanks to Principal Washington for -- not just for the warm introduction, but for his enthusiasm and his energy and his leadership and his nice singing voice. Thank you. To all the trustees, to the alumni, to the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins -- everybody who's been a part of this extraordinary place.

And I want to recognize our student speakers. Cindy, who embodies the best of our traditions in this country -- arrived three or four years ago and graduates as the valedictorian -- this is what is continually replenishing the energy and the dynamism and the innovation of this country, and we could not be prouder of you. Thank you.



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And to Simon, I'm glad that, according to the Constitution, you can't run till you're 35. So I'll be long gone by then. But it gives me great confidence to know that we've got such incredible young leaders who are going to be remaking the world in so many different ways.

Now, recently, an article from your local paper, the Kalamazoo Gazette -- was brought to my attention. And it ran just after this school had been chosen as one of the six finalists in our Race to the Top Commencement Challenge. And for those who aren't aware of it, this is a contest to highlight schools that promote academic excellence, personal responsibility and that best prepare students for college and careers. And this article in the Gazette quoted a young lady named Kelsey Wilson. Where is -- Is Kelsey here? She right over there? Anyway -

Audience Member: She's here.

President Obama: She's over there? Hey, Kelsey. How are you?

So Kelsey was quoted as saying, "We're the kind of school that never gets credit for what we do. And our school is amazing." This is what Kelsey said, "Our school is amazing."

Well, Kelsey, Class of 2010, members of the Kalamazoo community, I'm here tonight because after three rounds of competition, with more than a thousand schools, and more than 170,000 votes cast, I know -- and America knows -- what you've done at Kalamazoo Central. You are amazing! We know. We know. Our amazing Secretary of Education Arne Duncan knows. Folks in Washington know, folks across the country know, and hopefully after tonight, everybody knows.

Now, together as a community, you've embraced the motto of this school district: "Every child, every opportunity, every time." Every time. Every child, every opportunity, every time, because you believe, like I do, that every young person, every child -- regardless of what they look like, where they come from, how much money their parents have -- every child who walks through your schoolhouse doors deserves a quality education. No exceptions.

And I'm here tonight because I think that America has a lot to learn from Kalamazoo Central about what makes for a successful school in this new century. You've got educators raising standards and then inspiring their students to meet them. You've got community members who are stepping up as tutors and mentors and coaches. You got parents who are taking an active interest in their child's education -- attending those teacher conferences, yes, turning off the TV once in a while, making sure homework gets done.

Arne Duncan is here tonight because these are the values, these are the changes that he's encouraging in every school in this nation. It's the key to our future.



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But the most important ingredient is you: students who raised your sights, who aimed high, who invested yourselves in your own success. It's no accident that so many of you have received college admissions letters, Class of 2010. That didn't happen by accident. It happened because you worked for it. As the superintendent said, you earned it.

So, Kelsey, I agree with you. What you've done here at Kalamazoo Central is amazing. I am proud of you. Your parents are proud of you. Your teachers, your principal -- we're all incredibly proud.

Now, graduates, all these folks around you, I have to say, though, with the cameras and the beaming smiles -- they've worked hard to give you everything you need to pursue your dreams and fulfill your God-given talent. Unfortunately, you can't take them with you when you leave here. No one is going to go follow you around making sure that you're getting to class on time, making sure you're doing your work. Nobody is going to be doing that for you. Going forward, that's all on you -- responsibility for your success is squarely on your shoulders.

And the question I have for you today is this: What is each -- what are each of you going to do to meet that responsibility?

Now, right now you're getting plenty of advice from everybody. Some of it's helpful. And so I hate to pile on with advice. But while I'm here -- what the heck. I figure I should offer a few thoughts based on my own experiences, but also based on my hopes for all of you, and for our country, in the years ahead.

First, understand that your success in life won't be determined just by what's given to you, or what happens to you, but by what you do with all that's given to you; what you do with all that happens to you; how hard you try; how far you push yourself; how high you're willing to reach. True excellence only comes with perseverance.

This wasn't something I really understood when I was back your age. My father, some of you know, left my family when I was two years old. I was raised by a single mom and my grandparents. And sometimes I had a tendency to goof off. As my mother put it, I had a tendency sometimes to act a bit casual about my future. Sometimes I was rebellious. Sometimes I partied a little too much. Oh, yes, yes, this is a cautionary tale. Don't be cheering when I say that. Studied just enough to get by. I thought hard work, responsibility, that's old-fashioned. That's just people want to tell me what to do.

But after a few years, after I was living solely on my own and I realized that living solely for my own entertainment wasn't so entertaining anymore, that it wasn't particularly satisfying anymore, that I didn't seem to be making much of a ripple in the world, I started to change my tune. I realized that by refusing to apply myself, there was nothing I could point to that I was proud of that would last.



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Now, you come of an age in a popular culture that actually reinforces this approach to life. You watch TV, and basically what it says is you can be rich and successful without much effort; you just have to become a celebrity. If you can achieve some reality TV notoriety, that's better than lasting achievement. We live in a culture that tells you there's a quick fix for every problem and a justification for every selfish desire. And all of you were raised with cell phones and iPods, and texting and emails, and you're able to call up a fact, or a song, or a friend with the click of a button. So you're used to instant gratification.

But meaningful achievement, lasting success -- it doesn't happen in an instant. It's not about luck, it's not about a sudden stroke of genius. It's not usually about talent. It's usually about daily effort, the large choices and the small choices that you make that add up over time. It's about the skills you build, and the knowledge you accumulate, and the energy you invest in every task, no matter how trivial or menial it may seem at the time.

You've got an alum who plays for the Yankees, I hear. He's supposed to be pretty good. Now, Derek Jeter wasn't born playing shortstop for the Yankees. He got there through years of effort. And his high school baseball coach once remarked, "I'm surprised he still doesn't have blisters and that I don't have the blisters on my hands from hitting ground balls just for Derek." He always wanted more: 'How about one more turn in the batting cage? Or 25 more ground balls?'"

Thomas Edison tested more than 6,000 different materials for just one tiny part of the light bulb that he invented. Think about that -- 6,000 tests. J.K. Rowling's first Harry Potter book was rejected 12 times before it was finally published. Mozart was a musical prodigy, but he practiced for hours each day -- accumulating thousands of hours at the piano by the time he was just six years old. I understand that your boys' basketball team did pretty good. First state champions for the first time in 59 years. That didn't happen by accident. They put in work. They put in effort.

So, today, you all have a rare and valuable chance to pursue your own passions, chase your own dreams without incurring a mountain of debt. What an incredible gift. So you've got no excuse for giving anything less than your best effort. No excuses.

That's my second piece of advice, very simple: Don't make excuses. Take responsibility not just for your successes; take responsibility where you fall short as well.

Now, the truth is, no matter how hard you work, you're not going to ace every class -- well, maybe Cindy will, but -- but you're not going to ace every class. You're not going to succeed the first time you try something. There are going to be times when you screw up. There will be times where you hurt people you love. There will be times where you make a mistake and you stray from the values that you hold most deeply.



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And when that happens, it's the easiest thing in the world to start looking around for somebody else to blame. Your professor was too hard; your boss was a jerk; the coaches -- was playing favorites; your friend just didn't understand. Your wife -- oh, no. I'm just messing with Michelle right there. That was all in fun.

No, but this is an easy habit to get into. You see it every day in Washington -- every day -- folks calling each other names, making all sorts of accusations on television. Everybody is always pointing a finger at somebody else. You notice that?

Now, this community could have easily gone down that road. This community could have made excuses -- well, our kids have fewer advantages, our schools have fewer resources -- how can we compete? You could have spent years pointing fingers -- blaming parents, blaming teachers, blaming the principal, blaming the superintendent, blaming the President.

But that's -- Class of 2010, I want you to pay attention on this because that's not what happened. Instead, this community was honest with itself about where you were falling short. You resolved to do better, push your kids harder, open their minds wider, expose them to all kinds of ideas and people and experiences.

So, graduates, I hope you'll continue those efforts. Don't make excuses. And I hope that wherever you go, you won't narrow the broad intellectual and social exposure you've had here at Kalamazoo Central -- instead, seek to expand it. Don't just hang out with people who look like you, or go to the same church you do, or share your political views. Broaden your circle to include people with different backgrounds and life experiences. Because that's how you'll end up learning what it's like to walk in somebody else's shoes. That's how you'll come to understand the challenges other people face.

And this is not just an academic exercise. It's a way to broaden your ambit of concern and learn to see yourselves in each other.

Which brings me to my final piece of advice for today, and that's to give back, to be part of something bigger than yourselves. Hitch your wagon to something that is bigger than yourselves.

I know that so many of you have already served your community through efforts like your Stuff the Bus food drives and groups like Activists for Action. And I commend you for that.

But I also know that many of you are the first in your family to go to college. And right about now, you may be feeling all the weight of their hopes and expectations coming down on your shoulders.



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And once you start juggling those classes and activities and that campus job, and you get caught up in your own dreams and your own anxieties and dating -- you may feel like you've got enough on your plate just dealing with your own life. It might be easier to turn the channel when the news disturbs you, to avert your eyes when you pass that homeless man on the street, to tell yourself that other people's problems really aren't your responsibility.

But just think about what the consequence of that approach to life would have been if that's how folks had acted here in this community. What if those Kalamazoo Promise donors had said to themselves, "Well, you know what, I can pay for my own kid's education. Why should I have to pay for somebody else's?"

Think about the consequences for our country. What if our Founding Fathers had said, "You know, colonialism is kind of oppressive, but I'm doing okay, my family's doing all right, why should I spend my summer in Philadelphia arguing about a Constitution?"

What if those abolitionists, those civil right workers had said, "You know, slavery is wrong, segregation is wrong, but it's kind of dangerous to get mixed up in that stuff. I don't have time for all those meetings and marches. I think I'm going to take a pass. I hope it works out, but that's not something I want to do."

I want you to think for a minute about the extraordinary men and women who've worn our country's uniform and have given their last full measure of devotion to keep us safe and free. What if they said -- what if they said, "I really do love this country, but why should I sacrifice so much for people I've never even met?" Young men and women in uniform right now making those sacrifices.

So you and I are here today because those people made a different choice. They chose to step up. They chose to serve. And I hope you will follow their example, because there is work to be done, and your country needs you. We've got an economy to rebuild. We've got children to educate. We've got diseases to cure. We've got threats to face. We've got an oil spill to clean up. We've got clean energy to discover. And it is going to be up to you to meet all of those challenges -- to build industries and make discoveries and inspire the next generation. It's going to be up to you to heal the divide that continues to afflict our world.

Now, I'm not saying you got to do it here all at once. But as Theodore Roosevelt once put it, I'm asking you to "Do what you can, with what you've got, where you are." And I can guarantee that wherever your journey takes you, there are going to be children who need mentors and senior citizens who need assistance, folks down on their luck who could use a helping hand.

And once you've reached out and formed those connections, you'll find it's a little harder to numb yourself to other people's suffering. It's a little harder to ignore the national debates about the issues that affect their lives and yours.



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In the end, service binds us to each other -- and to our communities and our country -- in a way that nothing else can. It's how we become more fully American.

That's the reason those donors created the Kalamazoo Promise in the first place -- not for recognition or reward, but because of their connection to this community; because their belief in your potential; because their faith that you would use this gift not just to enrich your own lives, but the lives of others and the life of the nation.

And I'm told that soon after the Promise was established, a first grader approached the superintendent at the time and declared to her: "I'm going to college." First grader. "I'm going to college. I don't know what it is, but I'm going."

We may never know those donors' names, but we know how they helped bring this community together and how you've embraced their Promise not just as a gift to be appreciated, but a responsibility to be fulfilled. We know how they have helped inspire an entire generation of young people here in Kalamazoo to imagine a different future for themselves.

And graduates, today, I'm asking you to pay them back by seeking to have the same kind of impact with your own lives; by pursuing excellence in everything you do; by serving this country that you love.

I know that you can do it. After all, you are the Giants -- and with the education you've gotten here, there's nothing you can't do.

Thank you very much, everybody. God bless you. And God bless the United States of America. And God bless the Class of 2010.