

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on October 22, 2021

Location: Hendricks Chapel

Remarks: Remembrance Scholar Convocation

*The Chancellor was introduced by Professor of Practice and Executive Director of the African American Studies Community Folk Art Center, Tanisha Jackson.*

Thank you Dr. Jackson.

My remarks today are for this year’s Remembrance Scholars and Lockerbie Scholars, who we honor in this ceremony.

Remembrance and Lockerbie Scholars:

In your lives, you will continue at times to encounter attitudes and acts that deny the humanity of people you care about. These attitudes and actions are hard to understand. What’s even harder, and perhaps more important, when this happens is what you do next – How you respond and act in the face of the incomprehensible.

My wife and I raised our three young sons for many years in in Nashville, Tennessee. While we were in Nashville there was an incident that occurred that was very upsetting to me. East of Nashville there is an area of land known as the Cumberland Plateau. It is populated by people who have by and large lived there for generations. I had been on the plateau many times. The people there were polite but not exactly welcoming to outsiders.

The incident that happened was this: A family from North Carolina was driving across Tennessee in their minivan. They had a mother, father, three little kids, a grandmother, and their dog in the car. While they were crossing the plateau, their minivan was mistaken for a car involved in drug-dealing.

This family in the minivan were pulled off the highway by law enforcement, and all of them were made to stand like criminals against the car, including the grandmother and the little kids. And when their dog jumped out of the car, a law enforcement officer with a gun killed the dog. At first the story was that the dog had threatened the trooper. But then the dashcam video of the incident was released. It showed this family, treated with no dignity; a grandmother and three little kids against the car; it showed a really little dog, almost a puppy, jumping happily up, and then getting killed.

Back then, I was outraged. I called my best friend in Nashville, who happened to be the attorney general, and who I thought would have influence over the authorities on the plateau. He told me that there was not much he could do. And when I said the people responsible must be in real trouble in their community, he said “Kent, you don’t understand Tennessee. I doubt this guy will be an outcast. Those people up there on the Cumberland Plateau are a very insular clan. They won’t care too much about a North Carolina family and their dog.

I was dumbfounded. I was not a naïve person then, and I knew that people in insular clans could be callous and cold to people from outside their clan. But it begs the question - How do you fight an attitude like that?

Earlier this week, a government minister in the new regime in Afghanistan announced the government would make a special cash bonus payment to the families of each of the suicide bombers who had killed scores of people, including children, during the long war there. The minister made this announcement only days after ISIS bombers had killed dozens, including children, who were worshipping in mosques in Afghanistan.

I was again dumbfounded by what seemed to me an inconsistency. But I suspect that, if I could sit down with that government minister, I would get the Cumberland Plateau answer once again: He would say something like this: We are honoring our suicide bombers. Those ISIS people are not ours. And anyway, they are bombing Shiites, not Sunnis. So that is different.

Again I ask, how do you fight that attitude?

Remembrance and Lockerbie scholars, I ask you, each of you, this question, because it is precisely the question that the Syracuse University community asked itself in December 1988, when amidst the shock and the grief and the loss of Pan Am 103, we wondered how Syracuse University could fight callous evil that took human lives.

The answer that Syracuse gave was simple. Lots of people came together from across this university – faculty and students, librarians and athletes, staff and alumni. They decided they would fight back with Syracuse values – values that emphasize education, and decency, and love. The answer they came up with was . . . you. 35 Remembrance scholars every year, augmented later by two Lockerbie scholars.

They decided that every year, forever, as long as we are a university, we would assemble the best of our students, across all of the diverse groups that make up this university – all schools, all majors, all programs; all clubs, all sports, all student activities; all races and religions. We would assemble this group, give them a scholarship to help pay for their education, and educate them. Educate them each about one student who we lost and the importance and value of that life. Educate them about the act of hate and evil that occurred and what to do about it, how to pay forward a positive legacy of the people we lost. And educate the Remembrance scholars about each other – show them that no matter what group you come from in the university, you can become united by education and decency and love.

The Remembrance scholars and Lockerbie scholars now number more than a thousand. They are positive ripples and great waves from the tragedy of December 1988. There are many other similar waves that came out of Syracuse. One Syracuse leader who fought back after Pan Am 103 was Roy Simmons, Jr. the coach of our men’s lacrosse team. He decided to fight back by raising money to bring Lacrosse to Lockerbie. The team raised money for equipment and the whole team went to Scotland, where, not surprisingly, they played lacrosse, a sport almost no one in Scotland had ever seen. They left equipment behind in Scotland at Lockerbie Academy, and sent coaches in later years. And so, the sport of Lacrosse was born in Scotland, where it has waxed and waned ever since.

Earlier this year, I received an amazing letter from a Coach of the Scottish National Men’s Lacrosse team. Yes, there are now national lacrosse teams in Scotland that compete internationally. In the letter, the coach explained to me that every clan in Scotland has its own tartan, its own plaid fabric with particular colors and pattern, worn in their kilts. He said, and I quote “each clan has its own unique color and pattern that creates a symbol of our kinship with each other.”

This is what one of the tartans looks like, from a kilt I borrowed from a friend. This is the Grant clan tartan. These tartans are nametags and so much more in Scotland – they tell at a glance who you are and what clan you belong to. They are so important that the government regulates them, and only the government can authorize a new tartan. And the government had recently agreed that its national lacrosse team should have a tartan. The Scottish coach told me that all corners of the Lacrosse community in Scotland had come together and agreed that their tartan must be weaved by the end of 2021, and must have two features: It must pay respect to the Iroquois Nationals, and the Haudenosaunee who gave us the game of Lacrosse, and it must remember the origins of the sport in first coming to Scotland because of the Lockerbie disaster.

And so, the coach continued, on behalf of the people of Scotland, he was asking my permission to weave Syracuse University orange into the clan tartan of the National Lacrosse team of Scotland.

This was **not** one of the harder decisions I have had to make this year. I said yes, and thank you. And I said a prayer of thanks for Roy Simmons Jr. and his way of responding to Pan Am 103

Remembrance and Lockerbie scholars, I tell you this story for this reason. Orange is now woven into the fabric of the clan of Lacrosse in Scotland, and that Orange stands for something – for education and decency and love.

For the rest of your glorious careers – and I know they will be glorious, because that is part of why you were selected as scholars – for the rest of your careers, remember that you were and are a Remembrance Scholar or a Lockerbie Scholar.

When you encounter a situation that is callous or cruel to outsiders – and I assure you that you will – remember this tartan, and weave a little orange into the fabric of that situation. A little decency, a little education, a little love. Do that, and you will pay forward the legacy of the people you have so nobly remembered, and we will be as proud of you in the future as we are of you today.

Thank you, and Go Orange.

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