

*Syracuse University*

# **New Student Convocation 2007**

*Speech by Chancellor Nancy Cantor*

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**Class of 2011 and all of you entering Syracuse University and SUNY-ESF for the first time, welcome! We celebrate your arrival! This is your campus, this is your city, this is your world, and this is your time to shine!**

**As you know, you've come to a place with great traditions and history, and we are proud of it – this dome is full today of amazing alumni who have sat in your seats – some are parents of new students – some are faculty and staff who will assist you on your journey. Let's cheer for our SU alumni as they stand [pause] to meet the Class of 2011.**

**You've come to a place that is really trying to make a difference in this world – right now. This is a place for learning of many kinds, learning that can transform you and your world--right now. So here, at the very beginning, it's essential to recognize that the key to success in these efforts, just as it is for all of us, is to throw caution to the wind and believe that not only can you make a difference, however incremental, you have a responsibility to try because you are here.**

**Institutions, like people, have personalities that reflect not just what they *are* but what they *do*. Yes, we *are* already a special place. We have a vast campus with 247 buildings (including wonderful new structures like Newhouse III and the interdisciplinary Life Sciences Complex going up as we speak), a very diverse student body, faculty, and staff from all over the world and 13 schools and colleges that offer virtually every major field of study, from engineering to entrepreneurship, theater, art, and architecture to earth sciences and philosophy. Or you might try religion and the media, international relations, information studies, the environment, law and public policy, or any of a host of other fascinating fields. You ask for it, we teach it!**

But we, like all of you, are defined as an institution and a community by more than what we already are – by what we can do. Our commitment to excellence is defined by doing as well as by knowing; by our courage to try, and to risk being wrong, and most of all by the compassion we mount for being *in the world*, for caring about others and seeing ourselves as interdependent with others.

Our world is wracked with violence and war, hunger, disease, and poverty. The environment is under threat, from the mercury in our forests to the very air we breathe. Many children attend schools that have been described as "failure factories."<sup>1</sup> Our world is crying out for justice and for peace. Yet, please, let's not forget that it is also full of possibility and so much untapped talent for creative solutions.

As the novelist Alice Walker has observed, "We can do nothing substantial toward changing our course on the planet .... without rousing ourselves, individual by individual, and bringing our small, imperfect stones to the pile."<sup>2</sup> As individuals, and in partnership with others, we can be immensely powerful. And we---you---are the world's best hope for change --- so bring your stone to the pile!

You may imagine that you are enrolling here to *prepare* for the rest of your life. In fact, all of us---including me---have been telling you that higher education will prepare you for work and for citizenship. That's true, at some level: in a few years, you will earn a credential that will open the door to participation and success in a knowledge economy. But you can and must do more than that.

We want you to realize that you are an important participant *now* in our university and in our larger community. As you develop your capacity for critical thinking---a talent that is widely sought and rightly rewarded in our society---we will encourage you to develop other abilities as well: your capacities for listening, for empathy, and for collaboration with others who bring with them a kaleidoscope of differences. One mark of an educated person is the realization that, although no one knows everything, everyone can contribute something.

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<sup>1</sup> Editors of Rethinking Schools, "The Small Schools Express," *Rethinking Schools Online*, 19-4 (Summer 2005) found at [http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/19\\_04/expr194.shtml](http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/19_04/expr194.shtml).

<sup>2</sup> Alice Walker, *Anything We Love Can Be Saved; A Writer's Activism* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997) xxiii.

Vaclav Havel, the extraordinary playwright, and the first president of the independent Czech Republic, wrote, "Hope is a state of mind, not of the world. . . Hope, in this deep and powerful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously heading for success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good."<sup>3</sup>

Indeed our vision for Syracuse University, which we call Scholarship in Action, takes that hope into the classroom, the laboratory, onto the stage and the trading floor, and out into the world. We are out there testing our ideas where they and we can make a difference. The boundaries of the University do not stop up here on the hill. Just as you are living everywhere, we want you to learn everywhere, moving the boundaries of your lives to include the city of Syracuse, the sovereign territories of our neighboring Haudneosaunee Nations, farms, lakes, and cities across the world. You will quickly find that there is barely a place where Syracuse University hasn't reached, and our motto is to team up with communities of experts near and far to put our scholarship into action.

Over the summer, *I read* – as you did in the first year shared reading -- Tracy Kidder's description of the life of Dr. Paul Farmer, *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. I was struck by Farmer's passion to see the world *as it is*, and his determination to make others see it. Kidder writes, "Of all the world's errors, he [Farmer] seemed to feel, the most fundamental was the 'erasing' of people, the 'hiding away' of suffering. [Farmer said:] 'My big struggle is how people can not care, erase, not remember.'"<sup>4</sup>

All through our lives, from the beginning to the end, we make and re-make our sense of self through the relations we have with other people. To create and sustain full lives for ourselves, we must tear off any blinders, and find new eyes to know each other as people, not just as “others” for whom we have no communal responsibility.

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<sup>3</sup> Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace*, Chapter 5 (1986; tr 1990).

<sup>4</sup> Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains; The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (New York: Random House Paperbacks, 2004) 218-219.

**Why is this so important now? Because you have a chance – not a certainty – but a chance to get new eyes, and with them to make a difference in this world. Will there be a cost to you? Probably. But, as Farmer says, "There's a lot to be said for sacrifice, remorse, even pity. It's what separates us from roaches."<sup>5</sup>**

**Starting now, I invite you to cross into new territory and see the world in new ways, starting with the community where you have come to live, starting with each other, with those just like you and those who seem so utterly different. You will find many, many chances on this campus, from student groups to dialogue circles, and many opportunities off campus to get new eyes and to make a difference.**

**And there is no single recipe for doing it, which is one reason we value the diverse experiences each of you bring to SU as much as we deeply value the history of opportunity-making in this university and in this region. Decades, indeed centuries of opportunity have been written in this place – from Ernie Davis to Eileen Collins. So visit Seneca Falls, where the first women's rights convention was held in 1848, or go downtown in Syracuse to the Erie Canal Museum to see the birthplace of America's industrial revolution. In fact, you'll start on that journey right away, tomorrow night.**

**For among other things, we want you to jump right into life in the city of Syracuse, into its proud history, rich culture and its determination to thrive in a new economy. Join us tomorrow night as we travel the Connective Corridor to Armory Square downtown and "feel the pulse of Syracuse" through music, food, and dance! We're eager to introduce you to the arts, culture, and organizations that nourish and strengthen the heart of our community.**

**And as you start to get your bearings in this place, resist getting too comfortable, for there is work to be done, and while each of you will do it in your own way, we suggest that none of you forget what Paul Farmer demonstrated. To paraphrase his colleague Jim**

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

**Kim: Take from Paul not a manual for your own lives, but the proofs he created that seemingly intractable problems can be solved.<sup>6</sup>**

**Go forth to solve them, and have fun at it! Welcome – we are so glad you are here.**

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.