

**Chancellor Nancy Cantor's remarks at Syracuse University's
Convocation for New Students
Friday, August 27, 2004**

As we look around this huge space, it's not very hard to picture football, basketball and lacrosse, and imagine ourselves here, in the stands, wearing other clothes, and cheering on the Orange.

But this morning, as you and I begin our careers at Syracuse University, I'd like to suggest another way to view this campus—as “experience-oriented imaginative space,” to use Barbara White's words. I want you to think about the creative infrastructure on campus that allows us to see our lives and the lives of others simultaneously from different perspectives—that is, to take the spaces we are in, like the Dome today, and reinvent them so as to experience the world from multiple perches.

To put it another way, an institution of higher education, if it does anything well, should enable this creative work in which people experience alternative worlds, exchange perspectives, have empathy of mind. This does not mean there's one real experience, one truth, to search for—but it does mean there are many experiences, and it matters where you are positioned. People have to take the context into account. This is one thing the arts, including literature, are about. They can put us in the minds, the sensibilities, the experiences of others, in an intimate way.

I was born and raised in New York City, and I'm proud of it. I had never eaten—or even smelled—a fried green tomato before I saw the movie of the same name, and I've seen that movie dozens of times because it's one of my favorites.

I can almost feel the red dust of Alabama in the 1930s, and I can identify with the panic of Idgie Threadgood, a little girl with skinned up knees, who is late getting dressed for her sister's wedding when her mother yells at the top of her lungs, “Imageene Louise Threadgood, this is your MAMMA!!!!” I can't do the accent, but we all know that call. Maybe some of you heard the same kind of call at your door this morning.

We—you and I—may no longer answer directly to that call, but we can feel its force, the gravity of its message—get your act together kid, this is the big leagues!

A work of art, a movie, a play, a photograph can send us instantly to a different time and place. Sometimes we are scandalized. But usually we also find it easy to empathize—with someone or something. Those of you who are fans of “Fried Green Tomatoes” will never forget the cry “Towanda!” as Kathy Bates avenges an insult from two sassy girls.

Before you engineers and business students think I am talking only to English majors and artists, I want to remind you that the creative place I'm describing, the place that mirrors life but is not exactly life, is exactly what you will study and then design for yourself in your laboratories, on your computer, and in the economic models you use to simulate markets. You will create imaginary spaces and learn from them.

And as you get into it, whether you're making a documentary film or doing an experiment in biology, you will start to put down your guard and see different frameworks and possibilities. That's what we want to do when we explore. That's what we always do.

Over the summer, as part of The Shared Reading Program, each of you was asked by your college to read a book. The reading program is intended to emphasize the importance of Syracuse as a community of scholars sharing a common intellectual experience and comfortable with sharing ideas. This includes imagining the world in different ways, from different perches.

Some of you have read the book "Colored People," in which Henry Louis Gates describes life in his hometown of Piedmont, West Virginia, a world which has vanished into death and history but lives in the memories and perceptions of those who were there and still profoundly affects the culture in which all of us live today. I'll read a few lines so the rest of you get the idea:

"All things considered, white and colored Piedmont got along pretty well in those years, the fifties and early sixties. At least as long as colored people didn't try to sit down in the Cut-Rate or at the Rendezvous Bar, or eat pizza at Eddie's, or buy property, or move into the white neighborhoods, dance with, [or] date ... white people. Not to mention try to get a job in the craft unions at the paper mill. Or have a drink at the white VFW, or join the white American Legion, or get loans at the bank, or just generally get out of line. Other than that, colored and white got along pretty well."

Others among you have been asked to read Neal Gabler's book "Life: The Movie," in which he addresses one of the central questions of our age, one most of us have asked ourselves. How could fiction possibly compete with the stories authored by real life?

Each of you is bringing your life story here to begin a new chapter, and I urge you to seek expansive spaces in which to continue, places where you can feel at home and yet connected to others who may not be just like you, free to take risks and aware of your responsibilities to yourself and to others—to your families, your friends, to your dates, your classmates, your teammates, and to others you don't know yet, who may live across the city or across the world but need your empathy, your energy, and your ideas and, in turn, can collaborate with you in many unexpected ways to help you learn what you will end up needing to know.

We have many alumni who have done this. One of them is Colonel Eileen Collins, the first woman pilot of a space shuttle and later the first woman commander of a shuttle mission. She grew up in Elmira, New York, where her parents would take her to the airport to watch the planes because she had always dreamed of flying. "When I was in high school," she said later, "I never thought I would be an astronaut. We didn't have women astronauts then."

Her family didn't have the money to send her to college, so she attended community college and then got a two-year scholarship to Syracuse. While she was here, she joined the Air Force ROTC because they promised to "teach me how to fly." She graduated in 1978 with a degree in mathematics and economics, started flight school, and just kept going.

If there is one thing that outstanding alumni tell us, it is, "Syracuse gave me a chance" or "Syracuse took a chance on me." They, in turn, took that chance to pursue their dreams.

Syracuse alumni who exemplify the very best traditions of Syracuse are on the platform with me today and in the audience. I am so proud to be with them, and I would like to ask all SU alums in the audience and among the faculty to stand and be recognized.

I also want to give a warm welcome to the new SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry students, who have a special, close relationship with this university and will share some classrooms, dorms, dining halls, and recreation with us in the coming year.

In closing, I'd like to bring up a subject important to me: family. As you may or may not know, I'm the first Chancellor since 1969 to have kids in the Chancellor's residence, not to mention a dog. Obviously, my family is very important to me, and I use the word "family" both literally and figuratively, as each and every one of you is part of my new, extended family. You really are my class, my first class as Chancellor at Syracuse.

So, in the spirit of family, I'd like to end with a quote from one of my 19-year-old daughter's favorite movies [she will be a sophomore in college this year, and is moving in at Wisconsin-Madison as we speak.] The movie is "Ferris Bueller's Day Off," and Ferris says, "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in awhile, you could miss it." This is a fabulous campus, and we're delighted to have you! Thank you for your time, have a great first week, never hesitate to stop in and say hello. Good luck, and GO ORANGE!