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A Message From the Governor

The Santa Fe Indian School (SFIS) graduation for 2016 was particularly special with the First Lady Michelle Obama as the commencement speaker for the graduating class of 2016. When the news broke that the First Lady would be the commencement speaker, it sent a wave of excitement through Indian Country and the state. The SFIS administrators, the Board of Trustees and staff handled this graduation very well by making this a ceremony for the students and their families and preventing it from becoming a political event, this being an election year.

The First Lady gave a powerful speech focusing on family and how her family, particularly her parents, played a vital role in her development by instilling in her the values that she has today. She commented that her values are similar to the values that these graduating students grew up with and were taught by their families. The values she mentioned were treating one another with respect, acting with integrity and giving back to those in need. She also appropriately advised the graduates to “please remember that your communities need even more of your energy and expertise. They need you to bring home additional knowledge and skills to more effectively address the challenges your communities face.”

This was very powerful speech that we all should keep and read when challenges become tough to inspire us and remind us of our core values.

Governor David R. Yepa

FIRST LADY ADDRESSES SANTA FE INDIAN SCHOOL GRADUATES



Photo by Eileen Shendo.

It is beyond an honor and a pleasure to be with you all today. I want to start by thanking Hanna and Michael for their wonderful introduction. And I want to recognize all of the other outstanding student leaders who have graced us with their words today. I'm so proud of you all.

I also want to thank the Governors, the tribal leaders, elders, board of trustees, along with the superintendent and your amazing principal, your teachers and staff. I wish I could meet you all, and could spend a whole week with you. I also want to thank the Tewa dancers who performed for us today.

To the class of 2016: You all did it! Woo-hoo! You're here! You made it! After so many long afternoons and late nights studying for exams, writing papers; after countless hours preparing to present your senior honors projects to your communities; after all those jalapeno nachos you ate at the EAC – yes, I heard about that – you did it. You're here. You made it. And we are all so very, very proud of you. I love you all so much.

I want just to take a moment to look around at the people who helped you on your journey – your families and friends, everyone in your school and your communities – all the people who pushed you and poured their love into you and believed in you even when you didn't believe in yourselves sometimes. Today is their day, too, right? So let's, graduates, give

them big, old, loud shout-out and love to our families. Thank you all.

That's where I want to start today – with family, in particular with my own family. I want to tell you about the people who came before me and how they made me who I am today.

I am the great-great-granddaughter of Jim Robinson, who was born in South Carolina, lived as a slave, and is likely buried in an unmarked grave on the plantation where he worked. I am the great-granddaughter of Fraser Robinson, an illiterate houseboy who taught himself to read and became an entrepreneur, selling newspapers and shoes. I am the granddaughter of Fraser Robinson Jr., who left the only life he'd ever known to move his family north, seeking a place where his children's dreams wouldn't be so limited by the color of their skin.

And I am the daughter of Fraser Robinson III and Marian Robinson, who raised me and my brother in a tiny apartment on the South Side of Chicago, just upstairs from my elderly great aunt and uncle, who my parents cared for, and just blocks away from our extended family – a host of grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins who were always in and out of each other's homes and lives, sharing stories and food and talking and laughing for hours.

And while my parents were products of segregated schools, and neither of them had an education past high school, they knew with every bone in their bodies that they wanted their kids to go to college. That was their mission from the day we were born. So my mother volunteered at our school so she could make sure we were taking our studies seriously. And my father worked as a pump operator at the city water plant, saving every penny for our college tuition. And when my father was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis – a disease that affected his muscles and made it hard for him to walk and even dress himself in the morning – I remember he hardly ever missed a day of work, no matter how sick he was, no matter how much pain he was in.

And I will never forget the look of pride on their faces as I walked across the stage at Princeton University, and three years later at Harvard Law School to accept my diplomas – degrees that have given me opportunities that my parents never could have dreamed of for themselves.

So, graduates, this is my story. I'm sharing this with you because I heard that – when you were first brainstorming about who to invite to your commencement and someone suggested me or my husband – some thought that was an impossible dream, that it just wasn't realistic to think that people like us would ever visit a school like yours. Well, today, I want you to know that there is nowhere I would rather be than right here with all of you.

Because while I might have grown up across the country, and while my journey may be a bit different than yours, when I learned about all of you, it was clear to me that our stories are connected, and that your values – the values that infuse this

school – are the very same values that my parents handed down to me.

I learned respect from how my parents cared for my great aunt and uncle – how my mother would wake up in the middle of the night to check on my great aunt, how my father would prop himself up against the bathroom sink each morning, leaning hard on his crutches, to give my great uncle a shave. I learned integrity from my parents – that living a good life is not about being wealthy or powerful, it's about being honest and doing what you say you're going to do. It's about how you act when no one is watching, and whether you're the same person on the outside as you are on the inside.

My parents also taught me about giving back – that when someone is sick, you show up, maybe with a home-cooked meal; when someone's down on their luck, you quietly slip them whatever's in your wallet, even if you're not doing so well yourself.

And finally, my parents – especially my dad – taught me about perseverance. My dad had been an athlete his whole life. But if he was frustrated or disappointed by his illness, he never let on. He just woke up extra early each day, slowly fastened each button on his uniform, and eased himself down the steps one leg at a time, to get to his job and provide for our family.

So, graduates, I wanted to be here with you at your commencement because your values are my values – the values that carried me all the way from the South Side of Chicago to where I am today, standing before you as the First Lady of the United States. I also wanted to be here because your stories – your achievements, your contributions and the story of this school – inspire me.

As we all know, this school was founded as part of a deliberate, systematic effort to extinguish your culture; to literally annihilate who you were and what you believed in. But look at you today. The Native languages that were once strictly forbidden here now echo through hallways and in your dorm room conversations at night. The traditions that this school was designed to destroy are now expressed in every square foot of this building – in the art on your walls, in the statue in your MSC building, in the Po Pay Day song and dance performances in your plaza, in the prayers and blessings that you offer in your heart room.

And the endless military drills and manual labor that those early students endured have been replaced by one of the best academic curriculums in the country. And over the years, you all have proudly represented this school in chess tournaments, and science and robotics competitions, and every kind of internship and leadership conference imagin-

able. And nearly all of you are going on to college. And as the superintendent said, you've earned more than \$5 million in scholarships this year. That is breathtaking – breathtaking.

And whether you're saying an ancient blessing over your hydroponically-grown crops, or using cutting-edge computer technology to understand the biology and hydrology of your ancestral lands, every day at this school, you've been weaving together thousands of years of your heritage with the realities of your modern lives. And all of that preparation and hard work is so critically important, because make no mistake about it, you all are the next generation of leaders in your communities, and not years from now or decades from now, but right now.

Through your senior honors projects, you've already become experts on urgent issues like addiction and poverty, education and economic development. And many of you have already stepped up to implement your projects in your communities.

And as you begin the next phase of your journeys, please remember that your communities need even more of your energy and expertise. They need you to bring home additional knowledge and skills to more effectively address the challenges your communities face. That's why it is so important for all of you to hold fast to your goals, and to push through any obstacles that may come your way.

And here's the thing: I guarantee that there will be obstacles – plenty of them. For example, when you get to college or wherever you're going next, it's going to be an adjustment. College was certainly a huge adjustment for me. I had never lived away from home, away from my family for any length of time. So there were times when I felt lonely and overwhelmed during my freshman year.

And what I want you to remember is if that happens to you, I want you to keep pushing forward. Just keep pushing forward. And I want you to reach out and ask for help. I know your teachers tell you that all the time, but please understand that no one gets through college – or life, for that matter – alone. No one. I certainly didn't.

So the minute you feel like you're struggling – the minute – I want you to ask for help. Don't wait. Seek out a professor you trust. Go to the writing center or the counseling center. Talk to older students who know the ropes and can give you some advice. And if the first person you ask isn't friendly or helpful, then ask a second person, and then a third and a fourth. My point is, keep asking until you get the answers you need to get you back on track. Do you understand me?

I am so passionate about this because your communities need you. They need you to develop your potential and

First Lady Addresses Santa Fe Indian School Graduates, *Continued*

become who you're meant to be. And that goes for every student here who is thinking about dropping out, who is feeling discouraged. Your community needs you. And more than ever before, our world needs you, too.

And you don't need your First Lady to tell you that. All you have to do is tune in to the news and you'll see that right now, some of the loudest voices in our national conversation are saying things that go against every single one of the values that you've been living at this school. They're telling us that we should disrespect others because of who they are or where they come from or how they worship. They're telling us that we should be selfish – that folks who are struggling don't deserve our help, that we should just take what we can from life and not worry about anyone else. And they're saying that it's okay to keep harming our planet and using our land, our air, our water however we wish.

But, graduates, you all know that those are not the values that shape good citizens. Those are not the values that build strong families and communities and nations. You know this. So we desperately need your voices and your values in this conversation reminding us that we're all connected, we're all obligated to treat one another with respect, to act with integrity, to give back to those in need.

I know that perhaps I'm asking a lot of you. And I know that sometimes all those obligations might feel like a heavy burden. I also know that many of you have already faced and overcome challenges in your lives that most young people can't even begin to imagine – challenges that have tested your courage, your confidence, your faith, and your trust.

But those struggles should never be a source of shame – never – and they are certainly not a sign of weakness. Just the opposite. Those struggles are the source of your greatest strengths. Because by facing adversity head on and getting through it, you have gained wisdom and maturity beyond your years. I've seen it in you. You've developed resilience that will sustain you throughout your lives. You've deepened a well of compassion within yourselves that will help you connect with and give back to others who struggle.

And most of all, you have taken your place in the long line of those before you whose continued survival in the face of overwhelming threats should inspire you every day of your lives – every day. I'm talking about many of your ancestors who came together to lead a revolt, risking their lives to preserve their traditions. I'm talking about your predecessors at this school who defied the rules by speaking their languages and running away to attend ceremonial dances back home. And I'm talking about the leaders who reclaimed and reopened this school for you, rebuilding it in your image and the image of your communities.

All of these people, and so many more, have worked so

hard and sacrificed so much so that you could be sitting in these seats on this glorious day celebrating your graduation. And as we honor their legacy today, I'm reminded of how some of your communities have seeds that your ancestors have been planting and harvesting for thousands of years, long before America was even an idea.

And just as they have been blessing those crops and lovingly preserving those seeds through storms and droughts, struggles and upheavals so that they could keep handing them down, generation after generation, so, too, have they handed down their wisdom, and their values and their dreams, fighting to save them in the face of unthinkable odds, spurred on by their devotion to those who came before them and those who would come after.

And, graduates, today, all of that – all of that – lives inside of you. All of that history, all of that sacrifice, all of that love lives within you. And you all should feel so proud and so blessed to have the privilege of continuing that story. Because with the education you've gotten from this amazing school and with the values that you've learned from your families and your communities, your big, impossible dreams are actually just the right size – big. And you have everything you need to achieve them.

Now, of course, it won't be easy. But standing here with all of you, I am filled with hope. It's the same hope I feel when I think about my own story – how my great-great grandfather was another man's property, my great-grandfather was another man's servant, my grandparents and parents felt the sting of segregation and discrimination. But because they refused to be defined by anyone else's idea of who they were and what they could be, because they held fast to their impossible dreams for themselves and their children, today, my two daughters wake up each morning in the White House.

And every day, I try my best to pass down to my girls that same love and that same dreaming spirit that Marian and Fraser Robinson passed down to me, that same love and spirit that your ancestors passed down to all of you and that you will soon pass on to your children and grandchildren.

Because in the end, I believe that is the true path of history in this country. It is long – it is. It is winding. And at times it can be very painful. But ultimately, it flows in the direction of hope, dignity and justice, because people like you stand up for your values – people like you who stay true to who you are and where you've come from, and who work every day to share the blessings you've had with others.

In closing, I hope you will always remember your story, and that you will carry your story with you as proudly as I carry mine. I am so proud of you. I am so excited for you to continue this extraordinary journey. And I can't wait to see everything you'll achieve and bring back to your communities.