

## **2016 CORNELL COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS KAHN BRANCH '16**

President Brand, Chairman McGrane, Members of the Board of Trustees, Cornell College Faculty and Members of the Class of 2016,

My name is Kahn Thomas Branch. I am a student of International Relations, Religion and Political Thought from Washington, DC. I was chosen by the members of the Class of 2016 to be the student speaker for Cornell's 158<sup>th</sup> Commencement.

In preparation for this speech I researched what Cornell College student speakers have done in the past, and what other great institutions do for their Commencement student speakers. For example, past student speakers at Cornell College have touched on subjects ranging from the ability of the United States healthcare system to the nearing end of traditions in personal communication as a result of the new age of social media. Obviously very light subjects. At other universities, the traditions are just as simple and lighthearted. For example, at the oldest academic institution in the United States of America, Harvard University, the student address is made entirely in Latin.

With that in mind, I considered my options. Although speaking about the North Korean intercontinental ballistic missile testing would have been directly in line with the last few speeches at Cornell College's Commencement, I think it rather unoriginal. And I'll be honest, I love the idea of the full speech in Latin. However, even after two years of living with an up and coming Classicist, my Latin is nowhere good enough.

So today I will talk about a topic a bit more serious and complex than those mentioned before.

I will talk about mothers.

I will talk about mothers for two reasons. First, because I am sure somewhere in the back with the other parents, my mother is glaring harshly at me because I thought about



giving a whole speech in Latin on Mother's Day. Second, because of the words that have been used surrounding this day.

When today's ceremony has ended, we will sing a song called "Cornell, Greater Be Thy Name". That song shares a title that we will use whenever we refer to Cornell College: alma mater. Alma mater is, as it would happen to be, LATIN. It is an allegorical phrase used to refer to institutions of higher learning literally translating into NOURISHING MOTHER. In that same way, alumnus is derived of the Latin word ALERE, meaning to nourish. In Roman law, the term alumnus referred to a child that is put into the care of others, to be fostered until fit. In that same way, academic institutions are entrusted with the responsibility of taking in individuals and fostering over those individuals for an amount of time, until the children taken in are nourished and fit to enter their own care.

Over the years we have had at the institution, the role of the nourishing mother has been fulfilled by the institution as a whole but also by individuals connected to and affiliated with Cornell College. There were so many times where individuals stepped up to the responsibility of being loving and nurturing. Of course, our professors are the first examples we have of the nurturing motherly nature. It may not always be the professors that we have taken often and know well, like Rebecca Wines or Devan Baty who are always willing to bring cheese or good North African music to class. Sometimes it's the members of faculty you've never had a class with, like Professor Marcela Ochoa-Shivapour when she emails us to make sure we are doing alright in the midst of everything that may be going on around campus, or Christina Penn Goetsch who'll send a letter with a little nun figurine to remind you to remain tenacious in reaching future goals. The case may be that these individuals aren't even in the classroom, like Becki Elkins, always willing to listen and offer a hug, or Rev'd. Father Cathy Quel-Engel ready right upstairs with a blessing and a cup of tea.

All of us have had experiences when we have crossed paths with these individuals, or we have memories and stories like the ones I have just mentioned. There are so many names that can be fit into the scenarios I've mentioned before, like Lynn Ikach or



Bethany Miller or Sue Coleman. With love and care, these individuals have been almas maters, nourishing mothers, providing for us in preparation for the future.

The nourishing, caring nature of alma mater is not exclusive to female identified professors and members of the campus community. The beauty of the alma mater is that traits associated with the feminine personification of a higher level educational institution is that which can be associated with male identified professors and members of the campus community. The association can, like before, be made with the professors that we may have had personally like Joseph Molleur and David Yamanishi, willing to share their personal experiences as teaching points for the benefit of their pupils. Or the professors we may not have had but who were always there to be supportive and willing to help when needed, like Jai Shanata or M. Philip Lucas. Of course there are those outside of the classroom who are just as caring and nourishing as those inside of the classroom, like Paul Welchli and John Harp.

The people we have seen every day have been essential to preparing us for the future, providing us with the tools and the necessary resources to succeed in the future. Whether it be their time, their treasure or their talent, we can all think of individuals here at the institution that we passed everyday who served the motherly nourishing role.

But that role is not exclusive to those with positions at the institutions.

In the audience there are so many of you who have your own children or relatives who were at the institution at the same time as us, working to finish their degrees, and yet these parents and relatives of current students were more than willing to nurture and care for those who may have needed it. These are the mothers like Julie Capesius, Tammy McKenzie and Julie Wiley. But it's not only reserved to mothers, fathers too provide and care for the students away from family who may needed, like Kevin Wiley and Robby Bertschy did.

The love and care parents and relatives of the institution extended to others here is without measure. So many of us have relied on the beds they made, the meals they cooked and the love they offered us. The nurturing, motherly manner that these individuals have shown us over our time has allowed us to thrive.



There is a final form that the idea of alma mater, nourishing mother, has manifested itself here at Cornell College over the time we have had. It is in the students that we have become friends with and made connections through.

In our time, we have encountered classmates who have offered a loving kindness that is unlike any other, like what Nora McKenzie and Tim Wiley, or they have offered council, advice and support whenever it was needed, like Peter Catchings and Sarah Bertchy. These are our classmates who are willing to be bold and speak out for the concerns of others like Sanjuanita Martinez and Kayla Morton.

So many of our classmates have stepped up to the plate to care for one another, and provide for us along the path as we all attempt to reach a state of higher understanding of the world.

So on Mother's Day, as we celebrate the end of our academic careers, what is the lesson that we should take away in our final lectures at Cornell College? What is the significance of all of the names I have listed, some of whom you may not personally know?

The lesson is that we didn't get here on our own. As a young black boy growing up in Washington, DC, where I was expected to finish my undergraduate degree in six years instead of four, if I even made it to a college or university, I have relied on the kindness of so many of you all to get me where I am now. I know that the situation for a majority of us in the Class of 2016 were not in the exact same situation as black youth entering academic institutions. You all weren't challenged in the same way that some of your classmates of color have been challenged by society and by experiences here on campus, but I know there were times where you relied on the kindness of others.

Today is a celebration of the successes we have all attended in our time here, but it is a culmination of the kindness and willingness to help that has been shown to all of us at one point or another to reach this day. At one point we have all had an amazing Abbe Stensland, a fab Fi Amanour-Boadu, a caring Kalissa or Kenny Capesius Holcroft, a marvelous Mary Catherine and Trevor Persons a loving Lili Bjorklund, someone in our



lives who at one point or another has helped us along the path to get us to this point, graduates able to call ourselves learned.

The take away from our time here is to remember the motherly nurturing manner that we were shown to get us through our time at Cornell. We all know what it looks like, because of the first examples we saw in life. For me, it has been the people in my family from my great grandmother, grandmother, my mother and even my sister and everyone in between.

Remember how throughout life and especially with our time at Cornell College, we have had nourishing mothers in all forms, shapes, gender expressions, and ages help us through the steps of life. Cornellians, show that same loving caring nurturing manner to those around us, especially those who need it most, so that there will be significance to each and every time we call Cornell College our alma mater, and when we wish those around us a Happy Mother's Day.