

Thank Me So Much

Michelle Obama's May 7 Address to the Graduates of the University of Northern Iowa

Her address could have been titled, "It's All About Me," inasmuch as she used the words I, I've, I'd, I'll, we, me, my and our 181 times. The graduates may not have received any good advice from Obama, but they certainly learned a lot about *how she feels*.

The speech:

"Thank you so much. I am thrilled and honored to be here today to help celebrate the UNI class of 2011 – congratulations to all of you on making it to this day. Before I get started, I wanted to let you know that if my remarks run long, I promise to take a break and we'll crank up the music for the Interlude Dance. I've been practicing to get that ninja robot part just right.

In all seriousness, I want to thank President Ben Allen for that very kind introduction as well as Executive Vice President and Provost Gloria Gibson, Board of Regents President David Miles, all of the members of the Board of Regents and Katie Berge for her wonderful speech. I also want to thank Congressman Bruce Braley, former Governor Chet Culver, Cedar Falls Mayor Jon Crews and Waterloo Mayor Buck Clark for being here today. And I want to say a special thank you to everyone here in the UNI-Dome especially all of you who changed your plans so that we could celebrate our graduates together today.

Now, as many of you know, this is not my first time here in Iowa. In fact, it feels like....

...I've spent more time in this state than anywhere besides Illinois or Washington, D.C. My family was here a lot back in 2007. Long enough for my husband to have a sculpture of his head made out of butter.

But while a campaign is what initially brought me to Iowa, what brings me back today is something so much bigger, so much deeper and so much more personal to me. You see, this state, the people I've met here, and the things that I've learned here have all become an important part of my own journey.

Now, I have to admit that back when I first started coming here, I was pretty nervous. Most folks barely knew who my husband was, let alone who I was. I was still a bit uneasy about the whole "President thing," as our daughter Malia called it. I didn't know what it would do to our family or how it would affect our girls. I'd never been to Iowa before and I had no idea how folks would react to a perfect stranger waltzing into their kitchens and living rooms. So I didn't know what to expect.

But soon you all showed me exactly what makes Iowa such a special place. I'll always remember this one gathering in Sioux City, back in the early days. We were all at the home of a lovely family. It was a beautiful day, so we were all out in the backyard, folks

of all ages sitting on lawn chairs and on the grass, and even though not one single person there had ever met me before, I was warmly welcomed like an old friend. So, we just started to talk to one another about our lives and our experience[s], and the more we talked, the more my fears and apprehensions started to fade away.

I realized that these folks weren't strangers at all. They reminded me of my parents, my aunts and uncles, the neighbor kids from down the block. I just felt at home. So at home, in fact, that I kicked off my high-heels and started walking around barefoot in the grass. And that's how I wound up feeling just about everywhere I went throughout the state. Though for the record, I kept my shoes on most of the time.

And it wasn't just how folks treated me. It was how they treated my whole family. In Pella, an entire neighborhood sang "Happy Birthday" to Malia on the 4th of July. At the State Fair, they poked fun at Barack when he lost a carnival game. I'll never forget how people looked after our girls, encouraging them to jump on a trampoline with their kids or play with a puppy in a park.

They welcomed us into their homes in Perry and Cedar Rapids, at coffee shops in Waukee and Oskaloosa, and the historical society right here in Cedar Falls.

Now, these communities may not have been exactly like the one I grew up in. The folks I met may not have come from exactly the same background as me. But the more that I shared my story with all of you and you shared your stories with me, the more I realized that what truly connects us is our shared values, in the end there is so much more that unites us than divides us.

And that's really what I want to talk with all of you about today – I want to talk about those values. The values you've learned here at UNI. The values you've learned growing up and spending time here in Iowa. And how those values will serve you every step of the way on the journey ahead.

The first value I want to discuss is in many ways the most important – but it's also the most often taken for granted – and that is the power of family. Now, this is something that all you folks here in Iowa understand in your bones, to your core. I saw it everywhere I went – strong, connected families that looked out for each other and supported each other through good times and bad. And I can tell you from my own experience that nothing else in your life – nothing, not your job, not your hobbies, not the money in your bank account – nothing will sustain you like family.

When I was growing up, we might not have had much, but my family was – and still is – my rock. I was raised in modest means, probably like many of you. We lived on the top floor of a two-family home on the South Side of Chicago. My dad worked in the boiler room at the city water plant. My mom stayed home until my brother, Craig, and I reached high school, then she took a job as a secretary. In our household, we had rules, we did our chores, we minded our Q's and we ate our peas.

And while **we** had **our** share of struggle and heartache, **we** sure did laugh a lot. And **we** loved each other more than **I** could ever put in words. And even though those moments might seem far away, even though **my** father has passed and **my** brother lives 3,000 miles away, the bonds that **we** formed in that tiny apartment still connect us. They are – and will always be – **my** core and **my** compass in life.

So, graduates, after this ceremony is over, **I** want you to hug those folks up in the stands just a little harder. And then make sure that you call them next week. And the week after that, and the one after that. Because these are the folks who made you who you are. These are the folks who will stand by you no matter what life throws your way. These are the folks who prepared you to succeed here at UNI and who prepared you to contribute to your communities and to your country.

And that leads **me** to the second value **I** want to discuss – another thread which is woven throughout this university and this state – and that is the value of service to others. Now, the truth is, many of you could give this part of **my** speech yourselves because you've been living this value every day of your lives.

During the floods of 2008, so many of you were out there sandbagging. After the tornado, you went over to Parkersburg to provide all kinds of relief services to the victims there.

There were the Volunteer Tuesdays, where many of you served at agencies like the Salvation Army and the Northeast Iowa Food Bank. And students here have stepped up to serve our country and wear its uniform at a time when we're asking so much of our troops and their families.

That includes four members of your class who were commissioned as Second Lieutenants in the US Army just this morning. And **I** am proud that so many of you have stepped up to support them. You've already launched a veterans student organization. You're putting together a website to connect military students to UNI resources. You're working with the VA to provide matching funds to help vets cover tuition and fees if they need it. And **I** encourage all of you, no matter where you go in life, keep doing that – keep honoring our troops and their families.

We've all seen, just in the last week, how much these folks deserve our support. Just imagine, a small group of brave men, dropped by helicopter, half a world away in the dead of night ... into unknown danger inside the lair of the most sought after man in the world. They did not hesitate, risking everything for us, for our freedom and security. And they did it not just as Navy SEALs. They did it as husbands, as fathers, as sons. Their families were back here, with no idea of their mission or whether their loved one would ever come home. That is the very essence of the word "service." And the least we can do is give something back to these troops and their families who have given us so much.

I have seen again and again that giving back, that serving others, keeps everything in

perspective. Service is what connects us to one another, to our neighbors, our communities, our country, it reminds us that we are not simply individuals living isolated lives, but that we're all woven together.

So graduates, I hope that you all keep finding new ways that you can make that kind of impact. In my own life, I've found that helping military families is just one way that resonates with me. It's one of my passions, and it has driven me to start a nationwide effort called Joining Forces to honor these military families. This passion keeps me going every day, knowing that I'm part of something so much bigger, so much more important than just my own individual wants and needs.

And that's the third value I hope that you will all embrace – to find that passion within yourself, and follow it wherever it takes you. With all of the classes, extracurricular activities, and other experiences you've had over the last four years, this university has given you so many chances to discover that passion.

But that process of discovery doesn't stop when you leave this campus. I know that from my own experience. Back when I graduated from college, I was certain that I wanted to be a lawyer. So I did everything I was supposed to do. I got my law degree. I went home and got a job at a big firm in Chicago. By all appearances, I was living the dream. But the truth is, all the while that I was climbing, I knew something was missing.

Sure, I was working up in a tall building downtown, but when I looked out across the skyline of the city, even though I could see the community I'd come from off in the distance, I was so far up, and so far away, I couldn't feel that community. I felt like I was beginning to lose that connection to where I had come from. And I realized that I didn't want to climb anymore. I wanted to be grounded, working with the folks that I knew, folks like the ones I grew up with. I wanted to be mentoring young people, I wanted to be helping families put food on the table and a roof over their heads, I wanted to be giving folks the kind of chances that I'd had.

So I did something that shocked my friends and family, and added about a decade onto my student loan debt: I quit that job. I left that high-paying firm to go work for the city government. And from there, I moved on to lead a nonprofit organization called Public Allies, helping young people pursue public service careers. I wasn't making nearly as much money and my office wasn't nearly as big or as nice, but I was working with terrific young people and colleagues who inspired me.

I found that I would wake up every day with excitement, with a sense of purpose and possibility, because I was finally doing something that made me feel fully alive. And graduates, that's what I wish for all of you today – for you to find that career, that calling, that makes you feel alive.

Now, I know that your passions may not be the same as mine. You may feel most alive in front of a classroom, or a board room, or even in one of those high-rise Chicago office buildings. But no matter what it is, keep that fire burning. I know that it won't always be

easy. The path won't always be laid out neatly for you. Sometimes you won't be able to find that perfect job. Sometimes you might momentarily take a job just to stay afloat. Those are the realities of life.

But no matter what you do from nine to five, know that you should always try to find some way to pursue what you love. Maybe it's a hobby that one day becomes your own business. Maybe it's some volunteer work that helps you develop new skills and passions. You will have some false starts and setbacks along the way. But I promise you that if you keep listening to yourself, and keep yourself open to new possibilities, new people, and new ways of thinking, you will find a place in this world that feels right for you.

And that openness – that willingness to be exposed to new people and experiences – that is the final value I want to discuss today. This is something that I think truly defines the state of Iowa and its people. You all don't rush to judgment. You'll give just about anyone a respectful hearing. That was certainly my experience.

People didn't know a thing about me, yet they listened, they asked questions, they gave me the benefit of the doubt and a chance to show who I was. And that's because people here in Iowa understand that everyone has something to offer. Just think about your classmates here at UNI.

While you all might look similar in your black robes today, I know there is a kaleidoscope of talents, passions and experiences with which you've enriched each other these past four years. We've got graduates like Darion Watson, from Gary, Indiana. He's the first person in his family to go to college – and he's inspired his older siblings to think about getting their degrees, too.

We've got graduates like Ashleigh Peska from Martelle, Iowa, who works tirelessly across the state to raise awareness for people with muscular dystrophy.

We've got graduates like Renee Rapier, a singer from Marion, Iowa, who has won opera awards all across this country, even being invited by one of the Three Tenors to sing out in Los Angeles.

And we've got graduates like Nadine Ishimwe, who survived the Rwandan genocide as a child and came to Cedar Falls four years ago when she couldn't even read, write, or speak English.

Each of these students – and every single one of you – is unique in some way. Each of you has something different to teach the rest of us. And I would urge you to be curious about those who have experiences different from yours. Learn from them. Let their ideas and experiences challenge your own assumptions and perspectives.

But at the end of the day, don't ever lose sight of what makes you unique. Don't ever stop believing in what you have to offer. Don't ever count yourself out. And if you ever

do begin to doubt yourself, if you ever start to wonder whether you can fulfill all those dreams. I want you to think of two words that showed this country that young people here at UNI have got what it takes.

Those words? “Ali Farokhmanesh.”

And then I want you to think about all those other men and women who have come before you, the long list of distinguished alumni who have sat where you’re sitting today. There’s Molly Boyle, Iowa’s Teacher of the Year. Chuck Grassley, a six-term U.S. Senator. The first African-American principal in Iowa, Walter Cunningham. Nancy Powell, the Director-General of the United States Foreign Service.

And then there’s Nancy Aossey. Nancy grew up in Cedar Rapids, dreaming of faraway countries and peoples. She got her B.A. and her MBA at UNI in the early ‘80s, and then took a job selling phones. She went out to California, where she heard about a small startup nonprofit called International Medical Corps, an organization that worked in those faraway lands, responding to emergencies and helping local residents become self-reliant. She asked if they needed a volunteer, and it turned out they needed a CEO. So Nancy listened to her heart. She took over, and IMC took off. All told, they’ve directed more than a billion dollars in assistance and training worldwide. They’ve touched millions of lives, from Somalia, to the Balkans, to Haiti and Japan. And as CEO, Nancy has earned awards that put her in the company of Presidents, Generals, Nobel Prize recipients and Oscar winners.

Now you might hear Nancy’s story and think, “That’s pretty cool...but I could never do something like that.” But if there’s one thing I want to leave you with, it’s this: this university and this state have given you everything you need to do something exactly like that. The values you’ve learned here—commitment to family, openness to diversity, willingness to serve your community and your country, the courage to follow your passion—those are the keys to success in any field.

They are the building blocks of a fulfilling life. They’re the foundation of healthy families, vibrant communities, and a strong country. That’s what I saw when I first started coming to Iowa. And graduates, that’s why I wanted to come back, to remind you what makes you special and unique.

I want you to realize the power and value of your experience. I want you to feel the strength of this place that so many of you call “home.” And I want you to carry the values that you’ve learned here with you wherever you go. Share them with everyone you meet. Pass them down to your children and your grandchildren. Spread them throughout our country and throughout our world.

And whether your next step is New York or New Hartford, whether you’re looking for a job in Des Moines or New Delhi, I want you to truly believe that you can kick off your shoes and walk around in the grass anywhere in the world.

Because you can. So congratulations again, graduates. And Godspeed on the road ahead.”