

## **Commencement Address**

**By Congressman John Lewis**

**Adelphi University**

**May 21, 2007**

Thank you very much President Scott, Chairman Campbell, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, guests, parents, family, and friends, my fellow honorees, and to the Class of 2007, I am honored and delighted to be with you on this very important occasion. To each and every one of you receiving a degree today, congratulations. I want to thank the President, the Chairman of the Board, members of the Board of Trustees, and each and every member of the family of Adelphi University for this great honor.

You heard in the introduction that I didn't grow up in a big city like New York. I didn't grow up in a big city like Buffalo or Syracuse. I didn't grow up in a big city like Washington or Chicago or Detroit or Philadelphia. I grew up in rural Alabama, 50 miles from Montgomery outside of a little place called Troy. Yes, my father was a sharecropper, a tenant farmer, but back in 1944, I was four years old, and I do remember when I was four.

My father had saved \$300 and with that \$300 he bought 110 acres of land. And on this land, we raised a lot of cotton, corn, peanuts, hogs, cows, and chickens. If any of you come to Atlanta, downtown Atlanta, or come to Washington and visit my congressional office, the first thing my staff will offer you the moment you walk in the door is a Coca-Cola because Atlanta is the home of the Coca-Cola Company. (Laughing) Every now and then I may have a diet coke.

The next thing my staff would offer you is some peanuts, because we raise a lot of peanuts in Georgia. You know we had a peanut farmer by the name of Jimmy Carter who became president. But I don't eat too many of those peanuts. I ate so many peanuts when I was growing up in rural Alabama, I just don't want to see any more peanuts. (Laughing) Years ago, I would get on a flight and fly from Atlanta to Washington or Washington and back to Atlanta and the flight attendant would try to push some peanuts on me. And I'd say no thank you; I don't care for any peanuts.

But also on this farm, we raised a lot of chickens. It became my responsibility to care for the chickens, to raise the chickens. I know the class that is celebrating its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the Class of 57, and I know members of the Class of 2007, and I know members of the faculty of Adelphi University are very smart and very distinguished, but you probably don't know anything about raising chickens. (Laughing)

Let me tell you what I had to do as a young boy growing up in rural Alabama during the 40's and

the 50's. I had to take the fresh eggs, mark them with a pencil, place them under the setting hen and wait for three long weeks for the little chicks to hatch. I know some smart student, some smart professor is saying right now, "John Lewis, why did you mark those fresh eggs with a pencil before you placed them under the setting hen?"

Well, from time to time, another hen would sit on that same nest and there would be some new eggs, and you had to be able to tell the fresh eggs from the eggs that were already under the setting hen. Do you follow me? You don't follow me. That's all right.

Then the chicks would hatch, and I would cheat on this setting hen. I would take the little chicks and give them to another hen. Get some more fresh eggs, mark them with a pencil, and place them under the setting hen. I'd take the little chicks and put them in a box with a lantern, raise them on my own, get some more fresh eggs, mark them with a pencil, place them under the setting hen for another three weeks. I kept on fooling these setting hens and cheating on these setting hens, and when I look back on it, it was not the right thing to do. It was not the most moral thing to do, it was not the most loving thing to do, it was not the most non-violent thing to do.

I was never quite able to save \$18.98 to order the most inexpensive hatcher from the Sears and Roebuck store. We used to get that Sears and Roebuck catalog. Are any of you old enough to remember that catalog? It was a big book--thick, heavy. Some people called it the "Ordering Book," some people called it the "Wish Book". I wish I had this, I wish I had that.

As a young child, I wanted to be a minister. When I was about seven- years-old , one of my uncles asked Santa Claus to bring me a Bible. And I learned to read the Bible. And from time to time with the help of my brothers and sisters and my first cousins, we would gather all of our chickens together in the chicken yard, like you're gathered here in this hall. The chickens along with my brothers and sisters and first cousins would make up the congregation, and I would start preaching to the chickens. And when I look back on it, some of those chickens would bow their heads, some of those chickens would shake their heads. They never quite said "Amen." (Laughing) But the great majority of those chickens that I preached to during the 40's and the 50's tended to listen to me much better than some of my colleagues listen to me today in the Congress. As a matter of fact, some of those chickens were a little more productive; at least they laid eggs. (Laughter)

Because you've completed this assignment in your lives, you can now recognize the value of dreaming dreams and seeing them realized. This is a great day. This is your day. Enjoy it!

Take a long, deep breath and take it all in. But tomorrow you must be prepared to roll up your sleeves, because the world is waiting for talented men and women to lead it to a better place.

The world is waiting for you, for your leadership, for your vision to help build an all inclusive world community based on simple justice, an all encompassing community that values the dignity of every individual, what I like to call the Beloved Community.

Consider those two words, Beloved Community. Beloved, means not hateful, not violent, not uncaring, and not unkind. And Community means not separated, not polarized, not locked in struggle.

The most pressing challenge in our society today is defined by the methods we use to defend the dignity of all humankind. But too often, as a nation and as a people, we are focused on accumulating the trappings of a comfortable life--the big house, some new clothes, a shiny new car. But if you want a better, more just, more fair society, then you have to find a way to get in the way.

When I was growing up outside of Troy, Alabama and would visit the little town of Troy, visit Montgomery, visit Birmingham, visit Tuskegee, I saw those signs that said WHITE MEN, COLORED MEN, WHITE WOMEN, COLORED WOMEN, WHITE WAITING, COLORED WAITING. On a Saturday afternoon when we would go to downtown Troy to the theatre, all of us little black children had to go upstairs to the balcony. And all of the white children stayed downstairs on the first floor. I would come home and ask my mother, my father, my grandparents, my great grandparents, "Why segregation?!" Why racial discrimination?!" And they would say, "That's the way it is. Don't get in trouble. Don't get in the way."

But one day in 1955 at the age of fifteen, when I was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I heard the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. on an old radio, Dr. King inspired me to get in the way, to get in trouble. I got in trouble. It was good trouble. It was necessary trouble to make our country a better place. (Clapping)

My young friends, whatever you care about, whether it's getting to the truth about what has happened in our own country and around the world. Whether you're concerned about global warming, or the injustice of poverty, you have to find your passion and make your contribution. You must be maladjusted to the problems and the conditions of today. You have to get off the sidelines and get in the way. Get in the stadium. Go where the action is. You just have to get in the way and make sure your voice is heard. You have an obligation, a mission, and a mandate from all of those men and women who sacrificed before you. Some of them gave a little blood. Others gave their very lives for our democracy. So you must do your part. You have to find a way to get in the way.

As a participant in the Civil Rights Movement in the 60's, we didn't have a web site. We didn't have a cellular telephone. We didn't have an iPod. We didn't have a fax machine, but we had ourselves and we put our bodies on the line to make a difference in our society. We just didn't wake up one morning after having a dream and decide to march on Washington or to sit-in or go on a Freedom Ride or to march from Selma to Montgomery. We studied what Gandhi attempted to do in South Africa, and what he accomplished in India. We studied the work of Martin Luther King Jr.

And many of us grew to accept non-violence, not simply as a technique, or as a tactic, but as a way of life, as a way of living. So when we were beaten, or when a lighted cigarette was put out in our hair, or down our backs, we didn't strike back. We accepted the way of non-violence, the way of peace, the way of love. We really believed that we were building the Beloved Community and through our action, we brought about a non-violent revolution under the rule of law, a revolution of values, a

revolution of ideas. And I say to you today, all across America, and especially in the American South, when you visit, you will not see those signs that said WHITE WAITING, COLORED WAITING. Those signs are gone, and they will not return. The only place you will see those signs will be in a museum, in a book, or on a video.

Sometimes I hear some young people say, nothing has changed. I feel like saying come and walk in my shoes. (Clapping) In 1956, at the age of 16, being so inspired by Dr. King along with some of my brothers and sisters and first cousins, we went to the little library in Pike County, Alabama, a public library in the little town of Troy trying to get library cards, trying to check out some books. And we were told by the librarian that the library was for whites only and not for coloreds.

I never went back to that library until July 5, 1998, by that time I was a member of Congress, and I went there for a book signing of my book. Hundreds of blacks and white citizens showed up. I signed many books. In the end, they gave me a library card. It says something about the distance we've come and the progress we've made in laying down the burden of race. If someone had told me when I was preaching to those chickens, if someone had told me when I was sitting-in, getting arrested, and going to jail. If someone had told me at the time I was marching with Dr. King and others in Washington or marching from Selma to Montgomery, that one day I would be standing here, as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, elected by the good people of Georgia, receiving an honorary degree from Adelphi University, I would say, "you're crazy. You're out of your mind. You don't know what you're talking about. "

So I say to you members of this great class, never, ever, give up; never, ever, give in. Hold on to your dream. And as Senator Schumer said, just go forward. (Clapping) I want to close with a little story, and then I will be finished.

When I was growing up outside of Troy, Alabama, I had an aunt by the name of Seneva, and my aunt Seneva lived in what we call a shotgun house. I know here at Adelphi University in the great city of New York, in this great state, you probably have never seen a shotgun house. But my aunt Seneva lived in a shotgun house. She didn't have a green manicured lawn. She had a simple, plain dirt yard. From time to time, she would walk out into the woods and take branches from a dogwood tree and tie those branches together and make a broom. And she called that broom, the "brush broom." And she would sweep that dirt yard very clean, sometimes two and three times a week, but especially on a Friday or Saturday because she wanted that dirt yard to look very good during the weekend.

My Aunt Seneva lived in a shotgun house. For those of you who may not know what a shotgun house is, in a non-violent sense, a shotgun house is an old house, one way in, one way out, and maybe a tin roof. You can bounce a basketball through the front door, and it would go straight out the back door. My aunt Seneva lived in a shotgun house. And sometimes at night, you could look up through the holes in the ceiling, the holes in the tin roof of that house and count the stars. Whenever it rained, she would get a pail, a bucket or a tarp to catch the rainwater.

One Saturday afternoon, a group of my brothers and sisters, a few of my first cousins, about 12 or 15 of us young children were out playing in my aunt Seneva's dirt yard and an unbelievable storm came up. The wind started blowing, the thunder started rolling, the lightning start flashing, and the rain start beating on the tin roof of this old shotgun house. My aunt was terrified. She thought the house was going to blow away. She got all of us little children together and told us to hold hands. And when one corner of this old house appeared to be lifting from its foundation, she had us to walk to that corner to try to hold the house down with our little bodies. When the other corner appeared to be lifting from the foundation, she had us to walk to that side to try to hold this house down with our little bodies.

We were literally walking with the wind, but we never left that house. And graduates you must remember that we all live in the same house. It doesn't matter whether we're black or white or Hispanic or Asian American or Native American. We are one people. We are one family. We're one house. (Clapping) Maybe our forefathers and our foremothers all came to this great land in different ships, but we're all in the same boat now. So call it the House of Adelphi University, call it the House of New York, call it the House of Georgia, call it the American House. Call it the World House. We all live in the same house, and we must do our part to hold our little planet, our little spaceship, our little piece of real estate that we call mother earth together. Find a way to get in the way, and stay in the way. Let the spirit of history and the spirit of Adelphi University be your guide.

Thank you very much. (Clapping)