

Graduation Ceremony
NYU School of Medicine, Class of 2009
Keynote Speaker
Geoffrey Canada, M.A.
President & CEO of Harlem Children's Zone, Inc.

When I was asked to give this talk, I thought about when President Obama — well, he wasn't President at that time — asked me to come to Pittsburgh and give a talk on education while he moderated a panel. When I got there I said, "Has Mr. Obama ever heard me talk about education? Are you *sure* he wants me to say what I think?" They said, "Look, he believes in a big tent, Geoff. Say what you're going to say." So I hope that for the graduates and their families, in the end, I can feel the same way about this invitation — that they'll say, "Yeah, we really wanted him to come and say those kinds of things."

What am I going to say? First, congratulations. Second, what a great honor it is to be the recipient of this award. Third, how intimidating it is to be among so many doctors. I feel like I should make up an injury or something. The doctors are one thing, but I was back here with all the scientists. For me, it's really pretty intimidating. But I have a challenge. I've labeled my talk "Time Out," and I want to say that this is really aimed at the graduates, the new doctors. I want to acknowledge that this is a great moment for you — and it could be a great moment for our country. It's a great moment for you because you're graduating from NYU School of Medicine, and this happens to be —as Ken Langone tells me all the time — the top medical school in America. I understand that. It is. And you all have demonstrated by your hard work and perseverance that you have mastered your chosen field and qualified for your medical degree. So that's great for you all.

It could be great for the country if you decide to continue the pursuit of truth and enlightenment for the betterment of society, and not solely for the betterment of

yourselves. You're living at a time when your country is desperate for highly educated women and men who will fight to see through the veils of self-interest and half-truths, who will search for what is truly moral and just. You have spent time preparing for the next set of challenges you will face. Indeed, it is time to get in the game. What game? The game of life, a most serious game where the stakes are high. There are important choices to be made, and some people who choose or make the wrong decisions pay penalties that cripple them and ruin their chances to succeed and reach their full potential.

Some, from the very moment of birth, have the odds stacked so high against them that for all intents and purposes, they are out of the game before they ever get in it. But you? You have met the challenges, overcome the obstacles, played the right hand, and are prepared to enter the game. While you have been preparing here at NYU Langone, our country continues to grapple with some of the most complex issues, and it's doing so quite unsuccessfully. These complex issues hang over our heads today like a giant leaden weight, suspended by poor logic, faulty reasoning, and a degraded sense of ethics and morality. And I fear this leaden weight will in short order come crashing down on us, crushing all who can't get out of the way.

What are these complex issues? One is poverty. As our country has achieved the status of the only remaining superpower on the face of the earth, and as we are the richest country by far, we continue to have rates of poverty in America that shame us as a nation. Poverty is not some benign condition that simply means you live a little worse off. Poverty is a killer. Researchers at the University of Michigan reported in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* that people who earn \$10,000 per year or less die prematurely at three times the rate of those who earn more.

Another big issue we face is violence. America is a violent nation. We lead the Western world in beating and killing our wives and spouses. We kill our own children at record numbers. We not only physically abuse but neglect our children. Right here in New York City, there are more than 17,000 children in foster care.

Then there's youth violence. Our latest data from 2005 shows that 3,000 children and teens die from gunfire in the U.S. annually. That's eight children each day, 58 children a week. Think about that when you hear tonight's report of the casualties in the Iraq war. We are fighting a war overseas and our children are being killed here in larger numbers. Our country is rightly focused on a war overseas, where brave Americans are making the ultimate sacrifice. The Congress, the President, the nation is focused on their heroic suffering. But I ask, "What about our poor children right here in this country who are dying tonight? Where is the concern? Where is the national debate? Where is the outrage?"

Those who are poor in this country have a weight of poverty and violence and discrimination hanging over their heads, straining to break free and crush them, maybe kill them. And when this weight crashes down, you will not be under it. You have been guaranteed by the virtue of your education safe passage. That is not to say that life will be easy. It won't. Or that you won't have to struggle. You will. It is simply to acknowledge the obvious — those of you sitting here represent some of the brightest and best our country has to offer. You have proven that you have what it takes to make it. My question to you is, "Do you care about those who won't make it without your help?" This is not about how much money you will make. Some of you will end up quite wealthy and most of you, if not all of you, will lead lives of financial independence. You'll be paid for your time. I hope you will never let anyone pay you for your hearts and your souls.

We all have to be prepared to enter the big game of life, and I have a most wondrous proposition for you: Come join our team. We're losing. Yes, that's right, we're losing. There was a time when our team was winning. In the early 1970s, when I was in college, we were engaged in a struggle, a real war on poverty. We fought for civil rights. The women's liberation movement was happening, and it was the thing to belong to. The gay and lesbian movement was just starting. Our team was winning and it felt good. But today, poor people are out. Civil rights? Been there, done that. Today, self-indulgence is in. Caring about poor children is part of a laundry list of things that we are expected to write a check for. Citizens are taught that you don't really have to get involved, shape

policy, fight political battles. Just check off the space for Visa, MasterCard, or American Express on the donation form.

Their team is winning. Our team is losing. Yet I offer you a wondrous opportunity to join the losing team. Now, don't all rush up here at once, all right? I know this offer sounds too good to be true. Yes, you can join the losing side, but not quite yet. You see, it's not easy being on the losing side. You have to be careful. Because if you're not properly prepared, you will become a loser. We don't want losers. We want winners who aren't afraid to play on the losing side. It's tougher than you think on this side. There is evil out there. I'm not talking about some mystical, theoretical, hypothetical construct. I'm talking about the real thing — pain and suffering, despair and death.

So, our team needs you. The other team wants to buy your soul, so they'll offer you money and power and houses and cars and vacation homes and stock options. Our team offers you challenge and struggle, a rich intellectual life, honesty as a guiding beacon, and a good night's sleep. To be perfectly honest, the other side offers a good night's sleep also, but our side seemed a little weak on the benefits, so I thought I would throw that in there.

Do you know why I offer you this opportunity to play on the losing side? Because in the end, we are going to win. There is no way you can rationalize the fact that we are the richest nation on earth and yet so many of our children live in a poverty so devastating for them that this could be a third-world country. Our children live in a country so violent that in 2005, while 53 law enforcement officers were killed in the line of duty, 69 preschoolers were killed. Who can live in a country where it's more dangerous to be a preschooler than a law enforcement officer?

I know that an enlightened, educated group of women and men like yourselves would not tolerate their children living in those kinds of conditions. So in the end, we will win. So I invite you to come join our team — and please hurry, for some of us have been in the game too long and we are weary. And yes, even I get tired and weary sometimes. When

you fight in this battle, if you do it on the front lines, there are things that get to you sometimes. You know what it was for me? David Chen. He was a special person to me. He joined my martial arts class when he was a young boy. Two years after joining my class, his mother and father passed away, leaving him and his two brothers and single sisters on their own. The oldest brother had quit school to go to work, and those of us at the Harlem Children's Zone helped him the best we could with employment and support.

I watched David Chen grow up into a fine young man. I adopted David Chen, not in a formal way, but in the way you tell a child who has no parent, "Consider me your father." And he does. And then you begin to consider that child your son. That's how it was with David Chen and me. David Chen was a boy who went to church and sang in the choir — oh, what a beautiful voice he had! He was one of our Harlem peacemakers, and he spent his summers trying to make sure that our city was a safer place for children.

Several years ago, they killed him in a park in New York. Killed my son. And then there was the question, "What can you do?" That was the question all of my kids who loved him wanted to have answered. What could I do? If they can kill the best of us — the ones who played by the rules, who were devoutly religious, who worked hard and went to college — if he isn't safe, then who is? And if I couldn't save him, then who could I save? And what really could I do? In the end, I couldn't save David Chen, but I gave him what I loved and what he wanted. It wasn't what you might expect.

I had been given a gift from my instructor when I passed my third-degree black belt exam in Tae Kwon Do, a black belt with my name and the school's name embroidered in gold. The day we buried David Chen, I gave him the black belt he'd coveted. I knew it was a silly thing to do — it was too late for David Chen. But it's not too late for us. And my children gained hope from the act and they gained strength from my tears and they did not give up. And neither shall I. I must admit that, just for a minute, I felt a little sorry for myself. But it passed. You know why? Because of you. You may not know it, but you're about to join a rare group of men and women — NYU medical doctors, who are unafraid

to take on some of the toughest issues facing this country, unafraid to change the world. And in the end, I believe you will.

I have this fantasy that keeps playing out in my head. It's based on something that occasionally happened to me when I was a young boy in the South Bronx. I loved playing basketball and I was fearless. I just wasn't very good. However, I would convince my friends that we could win no matter how talented the opponents were. I had that gift and I would just convince these guys and we would travel all over the South Bronx playing basketball with other guys and invariably lose. But I had a brother named John who was a great basketball player. He was just a year older than me, but at 13 he played with the grownups. He was that good.

Every now and then I would be playing basketball on some blacktop somewhere in the South Bronx and we would be losing. And I would see the most glorious sight — this tall, thin figure loping through as my brother John finished his game with the big guys and was coming through the schoolyard. And I would stop in the middle of the game and I would call, "Time out, time out." Now, this was a tricky thing in a pickup game in the Bronx, right? We didn't have many rules and no one ever called "Time out." So they'd say, "Why you callin' 'Time out.'" I'd say, "Well, I want to do a substitution." You don't do substitutions in pickup games, right? And so we'd have an argument, and pretty soon they'd say, "Well, who?" And I'd say, "That guy." And they'd say, "Who's that?" And I'd say, "That's my brother."

Then I would see the flicker in their eyes. They thought, "That's your brother? You're pretty lousy. There's a good chance he's pretty lousy too." And they would allow my brother to come in. There would be jokes at my expense and smirks and smiles. And then John would come in and take over the game and the smiles would disappear and we would win. Well, my brother John died in 1972 during my sophomore year at Bowdoin — at the age of 21. There have been many times in my life when I have wanted to call "Time out." I just wanted to bring in the person who could win. You will face these

moments. And the loss of my brother — the loss of the sense that the hero was on the way — was something that took me a long time to accept.

So I've been in this game a long time, and I think that since 1975, the accumulated toll of the pain of my children has had an impact. I'm not the man I was 20 years ago. I don't know how long I can last doing this on the front lines, but I know I won't give up. And I don't feel sorry for myself because I've got a team, and with my team, we've made real progress. But I'm a realist and I know that my days are numbered. My time will come and I won't be afraid. I'll go down fighting with my team because that is what we have decided to do.

But here's my fantasy. One day not long from now, my team and I will be doing battle with the forces of darkness. They will be trying to reverse our progress. They'll be trying to hurt my children, to kill their souls. And it will suddenly hit me that I can do no more. The forces arrayed against us are too powerful, too mighty. Defeat is at hand. And I will not be afraid; I will not bow my head. I'll look at my team and say one last time, "Let's go down fighting." And suddenly, from behind me, I'll hear a mighty roar. And I'll turn around and I'll see a most wondrous sight: an army of new, young warriors — stronger, smarter, braver. And they will come charging down to meet the enemy.

And I will move to the back, look at my team, and say, "Who are these heroes?" And as they join the battle, I will realize that all we have fought for will not be lost. I'll grab a few young warriors and I'll say to them, "Where did you come from?" And they will look at me and say, "Don't you remember us? We're from NYU School of Medicine, Class of 2009."

And I'll know that my time has passed and that better women and men than me will continue this struggle.

God bless you and Godspeed.