

**First Lady Laura Bush—Senior Class Day Address
May 11, 2006**

The following is a Vanderbilt transcript of First Lady Laura Bush's remarks at Senior Day on Thursday, May 11, 2006. This is not an official White House transcript.

Thank you so much Chancellor. Thank you very much.

Thank you very much Chancellor. I'm honored to accept the first Nichols Chancellor's Medal on behalf of disaster relief workers around the world, and thanks to Ed and Janice Nichols for endowing this award.

I'm thrilled to see Chancellor Gee here, alive and well. To prepare for this speech, I looked through some old issues of the *Vanderbilt Hustler* and I was shocked to read that he had died of a heart attack. Many students may think that their presence here is a miracle, but earning a Vanderbilt degree is nothing like coming back from the dead, so congratulations Chancellor.

Kate Morgan, your Vanderbilt student body president, thank you and good luck as you move on next year to Lloyds of London. Martha Ingram, chairman of the Vanderbilt Board of Trust, I want to recognize and acknowledge the whole board. Thank you for your service to Vanderbilt.

And I can't help but acknowledge one Vanderbilt dad who happens to be the governor of my state, Gov. Rick Perry.

Thanks to the distinguished faculty, alumni, parents and families for your very warm welcome, but most of all thank you and congratulations to the Vanderbilt University class of 2006. Those are your parents applauding, there in the back.

I'm happy to see all of Vanderbilt's schools well represented today. Many of you are from the College of Arts and Science. Others are from Blair school. For

them, a Vanderbilt musical education means Bach and Beethoven, not karaoke at Lonnie's. There are students here from the School of Engineering. Your teachers tell me this may be the first time you've seen sunlight since the summer of 2002.

And of course I'm especially happy to see everyone from Peabody College. When I was in college I majored in education too, so on behalf of the soon-to-be Peabody grads, no, we do not write in crayon.

Members of the class of 2006, you represent more than 60 different majors, 50 states and 58 countries. But tomorrow you'll be unified by one distinction: you'll all be Vanderbilt graduates.

And that's an accomplishment worthy of celebration. You can see it in the faces of your parents. They're beaming. Your parents are happy for you and they're proud of you. They've worked hard to give you this opportunity and there's no better time than now to thank your parents and your teachers and your families, whose love and support brought you to this day. So please give them a round of applause.

You've received one of the finest educations in the world. And today, I'm supposed to share with you some parting wisdom. I thought back to my own graduation and tried to remember the advice my graduation speaker gave to me.

But I couldn't recall who had given the graduation address at the University of Texas in 1973. Maybe that's because, and I hate to admit this, I skipped the ceremony. But I did look it up and I found out who gave that commencement address. You can imagine my surprise when I discovered it was some guy named George Bush. Four years after that speech I married his son. We never know where life is going to take us.

But wherever you go, you'll be helped by the lessons you learned here at Vanderbilt. Many of those lessons were drawn from the tough decisions you had to make.

You're very different men and women than you were four years ago. And as you matured and changed, your university matured and changed around you. The class of 2006 was given a choice. Would you spend your college years resenting Vanderbilt's transformation, or would you leave your mark on your school? The class of 2006 took the better route. And because of you, the class of 2007 and 2008 and beyond will inherit a more vibrant university.

Other lessons you learned from your disappointments here. Maybe it was a test you scored poorly on, or a date that didn't end that well. For some of you, it was the day you arrived as a freshman with stars in your eyes, until you set those eyes upon Branscomb.

For others, you were excited to learn that your university had a baseball glove lounge, until you learned it was a place for silence and study.

But for every disappointment, you had more triumphs. Some you never expected, like watching Vanderbilt's football team beat Tennessee.

Others were part of your daily routine - every academic discovery you made, and every friendship you cherished. From both your failures and your successes you learned important lessons about life. And today, you're wondering how best to apply these lessons.

The class of 2006 represents the brightest and most talented young people in America. You're blessed with extraordinary idealism and energy. You've invested a lot in your Vanderbilt education. Now you want to know how to put your talents

and education to good use. This is part of the great uncertainty that comes with college graduation.

Today may mark the first time in your life that your life is not all planned out for you. But today also starts a period of incredible liberty and adventure, a time to find your calling and to demand the most from life, before life makes specific demands on you.

And as you face this uncertainty, I can tell you one thing that's sure: you won't waste your talents and education if you use them in service to others.

This is especially important for the class of 2006. More than any other generation of Americans, yours is tasked with resolving challenges that lie far beyond your doorstep, even far beyond America's borders. Because of television and the Internet, you can't ignore a tsunami in Southeast Asia or genocide in Darfur.

And you understand the great questions of our time: will we ignore people living around the world living under tyranny, or will we help them to be free? Will we neglect a continent suffering at the hands of HIV and AIDS, or will we restore hope? Will we look aside as American cities lie in ruin, or will we rebuild a better and more beautiful Gulf Coast?

You had the right answers to these questions, and you've made the most of the changes here at Vanderbilt. As you made the most, you gave them the best. And as you're eager to make most of this time of global change, so you can give your best to our world.

Many Vanderbilt students are already dedicated to helping others. Service learning is an important part of your curriculum here, and you volunteer throughout Nashville and around the world, tutoring local youth or building houses in Guatemala on Alternative Spring Break. You've held awareness

campaigns to help people in Uganda and Darfur. You've raised \$20,000 for victims of Hurricane Katrina.

Keep this dedication once you graduate, because there are so many people that need your help. Contribute to our efforts to spread freedom and democracy. For some of you, this will mean representing the generosity and good will of America in the foreign service or the Peace Corps.

Helping the cause of liberty will lead some of you to service in America's armed forces. In the Vanderbilt class of 2006, 31 students are adding to their college degrees commissions in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines.

Vanderbilt graduates are already finding this a fulfilling way to serve. One of them is Marine Second Lt. Erik Sallee, a member of the class of 2004. Last year, Eric was deployed to the northwestern part of Iraq. His work there is difficult. Eric was injured there recently when an IED detonated near his vehicle.

Eric says his service is worthwhile, especially when he sees Iraqi children smiling and happy that they're free to play on the streets, playing soccer and going to school. Eric said, "When I come to work every day, I don't have to worry about why I'm coming to work. That's really a great feeling of satisfaction for me."

Some of you may dedicate your talents to the fight against HIV and AIDS, and the challenge is daunting. Around the world, more than 40 million people are infected - almost 26 million of them concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2003, President Bush announced the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, a five-year, \$15 billion initiative, which uses treatment and education to combat the AIDS epidemic in Africa and other threatened regions.

In just three years, PETFAR has brought health and hope to more than 400,000 Africans who are HIV positive. PETFAR resources are also helping train

community health workers, Africans who teach people in their own villages how to protect themselves from HIV and AIDS, and who provide AIDS patients with drugs and medical care to control their disease. More community health workers are needed throughout Africa, and members of the class of 2006 who are going to medical school or who are studying nursing should consider contributing to this effort. With every community health care worker that you train, you'll build a long-term, sustainable, health care infrastructure, one that also can curb malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases ravaging Africa.

And you might save millions of lives here in the United States. The more community health workers there are in African villages, the more likely it is that any human outbreak of avian flu there can be detected early.

Vanderbilt students are passionate about defeating the global HIV AIDS pandemic. One of your classmates, Meredith Bates, learned about HIV as part of her Vanderbilt experience. Meredith spent her junior year teaching school in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. And she recalls that every single Saturday, everyone in the townships went to funerals. It was the Saturday activity. She said, "While I loved standing in my classroom, looking out over the beautiful, eager, young faces, I was debilitated by the fact that over one-third of my primary schools students were already HIV positive."

Inspired by her experience in South Africa, Meredith is now going to Uganda, where she will be the site coordinator for Vanderbilt's Kampala project. This summer, the project will bring more than 20 Vanderbilt students to Uganda, where they'll work to keep African schoolchildren free from HIV and offer them the hope of a healthy future.

International service opportunities are endless, but remember there are also great needs for your talents and energy here at home.

Young people in the United States need positive role models to take an active interest in their lives as mentors, pastors, coaches or teachers. Many in the class of 2006 will dedicate their lives to young people in classrooms. As a former teacher, I applaud your career choice.

One area especially hungry for your talent is the Gulf Coast. For the Vanderbilt community, last summer's hurricanes hit close to home. Many of you are from the Gulf Coast region, and some of your families lost everything.

In the face of this unprecedented natural disaster, Vanderbilt students rose swiftly to the challenge. During the Katrina semester in the fall, you embraced as your own around 100 New Orleans college students, from Tulane, Xavier, the University of New Orleans and Loyola. You welcomed them into your dorms and your classrooms.

One Tulane student, Ross Johnson, said that thanks to Vanderbilt, and I quote, "We didn't have to think about what was going on at our own schools. You let us just be college students."

Because of you, Ross and other Gulf Coast students will graduate on time this year, their dreams still intact, even after Hurricane Katrina.

Vanderbilt students also contributed to the recovery by volunteering on the Gulf Coast. The director of Vanderbilt's Office of Active Citizenship and Service Mark Dalhouse spoke of almost 100 students who went to Louisiana's Washington Parish, where you cleared debris, comforted children and rebuilt homes and churches.

The amazing part of that trip, Mark said, was the way it brought students of different religions, races and political persuasions together through fellowship and a sense of common purpose. He explained, "When you're building a house

with someone or clearing wood or comforting someone, the things you'd argue about fade into insignificance.”

Class of 2006, discover this fellowship and sense of purpose in Louisiana and Mississippi. It doesn't matter what career you're pursuing. This summer, before you start a new job or graduate school, travel to the Gulf Coast and help with the reconstruction. After you've made your post-Vanderbilt transition, dedicate a vacation to recovery. It will be time well spent.

And think about longer-term opportunities to help the Gulf Coast. Even before Hurricane Katrina, many residents of Mississippi and Louisiana were denied the promise of America. Now the Gulf Coast has a chance for a fresh start, which will be brighter if young and enthusiastic Americans establish their careers, their families and their lives there. The work you do during the week, whether it's teaching, or nursing or banking will revitalize the Gulf Coast economy, and in your quiet time you'll invest in your communities by working for justice and equality, by building schools and by sharing your time, your prayers and your love with your neighbors who are still grieving.

One Vanderbilt alum involved in the recovery promises that if you work on the Gulf Coast, your talents will be put to good use. He said, “It won't be like any other entry-level job. You won't be bored.”

And one student who volunteered on the Gulf Coast last fall knows that your efforts will be appreciated. She said, “It means so much to have someone there - just the fact that there are people who care and who are ready to help.”

Class of 2006, today your senior walk has brought you here to Alumni Lawn. Tomorrow, as you begin your journey beyond this university, wondering where it will lead you, remember the insight of one of your classmates. She said, “I

thought Vanderbilt would give me a roadmap to life. I didn't get the roadmap, but I got a compass."

If your compass remains fixed on a commitment to others, you will chart your way to happiness.

Congratulations to all of you. Thank you so much for giving me the chance to share this special day with you.

May God bless every member of the class of 2006.