

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

**Remarks at the White House Mentorship and Leadership Program
Graduation Ceremony**

June 15, 2015

Hello, everybody. Everybody, please, please, have a seat, have a seat. Well, I couldn't tell—I couldn't let these young men leave without having a chance to say goodbye.

Over the past year, I've had a chance to spend some time with these outstanding young men. I crashed their résumé workshop in the Roosevelt Room. We had lunch in the Diplomatic Room, and most of us didn't spill too much stuff on our ties. *[Laughter]* I showed them which fork to use. *[Laughter]* They showed me a thing or two on the basketball court. So this has been a great, mutual learning relationship between me and these outstanding young people.

And I've gotten so much out of the conversation, because it's been a privilege to hear about their lives and their families and their hopes and their dreams and a few fears too. The good news is, they're all dreaming big and they're dreaming smart. They know that it's going to take a lot of hard work and perseverance and integrity to get to where they want to be. They know they're going to face some obstacles along the way, sometimes some discouragement, because all too often the world underestimates young men like these. They know that their stories and their success can also help change the narrative. And that's a responsibility that each of them have, but it's one that they're willing to shoulder and, I'm confident, one that they're going to do a great job pulling off.

One of these young men, Gerard, told me that his goal was to become the Attorney General of the United States. *[Laughter]* And I told him, well, that's a big goal. I wasn't sure whether he understood how big it was. I did tell him he was probably going to have to get a new hairdo if he wanted to be Attorney General. *[Laughter]* And then, I walked him through all the other steps: He had to go to college, he had to graduate from college, you had to take the L-S-A-T—the LSAT—you had to get into a law school. You had to then pass the bar and do the work as an attorney and then potentially join the U.S. Attorney's Office and work your way up. I took 10 minutes just going through the whole path that it might take for you to become the Attorney General. And I thought maybe that would make Gerard back off a little bit. Instead, he said, "Okay." *[Laughter]* He didn't seem too fazed by it. And then, a couple weeks later, he spent the day shadowing Eric Holder, who has been an outstanding Attorney General, and apparently, he still wasn't fazed.

So it gives you a sense of the kind of young men we're talking about. We've got people here who are interested in being engineers. We've got young men who are already participating through the ROTC and are interested in serving their country in the military. We've got young people who are interested in the sciences and had some pretty fancy experiments that they were trying to explain to me that I wasn't exactly clear about, but sounded very impressive. *[Laughter]* We've got a few folks who are student-athletes and are looking to get scholarships, but understand that, as we discussed, the odds of you becoming a doctor or a lawyer or a school principal are a lot higher than you being in the NBA, so you want to make sure that you're not putting all your eggs in that basket.

And throughout this process, what I've been most encouraged by is just how resilient these young people are. And that's not just a credit to them, it's a credit to everybody who

encouraged them and loved them and supported them. So I want to give it up to all the moms and dads, grandparents, teachers, coaches, mentors who have poured their love into these young people, made sure they know that they matter and they can do anything. Give them a big round of applause. *[Applause]* Good job.

I want to say a special congratulations to our graduating seniors. Every—*[applause]*. Yay! Every single one of them is going to college in the fall. And I'm going to give each of them a special shout-out.

So we've got Mike Belay is headed to George Mason University. Mike. Chuck Edmunds will be in the honors engineering program at Morgan State University. Yay! Jonathan Larrain will study business at Northern Virginia Community College. Jerron Hawkins is sticking around here and going to Howard University. Noah McQueen is going to Morehouse College, going to be a Morehouse man. Bernard Mkumbuzi is studying engineering at East Carolina University. Marcus Russell will attend Virginia State University, VSU. Malik Brooks is going to West Virginia Wesleyan College. And Joseph West is heading to Morgan State University.

So the seniors are launched. They're well on their way. And then, we've got our outstanding juniors here, all who took college-prep classes and took the SATs, and so they're in the process of applying, just like Malia. And I know it's going to be nerve wracking—*[laughter]*—but they're handling their business. And so we're proud of them too. And those juniors, you've got a big year ahead of you, but we know you've got what it takes: intelligence, character, and a good sense of humor. So I'm confident that you guys are going to do great.

I told these young men as we were taking pictures before we came out that I could not be prouder of how they conducted themselves. This—we're just in the process now of starting to expand our mentee program not just here at the White House, but through "My Brother's Keeper." We're trying to expand this all across the country, because what we know is, when we give outstanding young people like this a chance, they can succeed. They just need a little bit of help. They just need a little bit of encouragement. Maybe a contact here or two. A mentor who is willing to show them the ropes. Somebody who is helping them to set their sights high.

And so what I told them is that although they will not be White House mentees after this class, they will always be part of my family and those mentors in our administration who are with them. And so they will continue to be able to count on us to help smooth out some of those rough patches and to get the kind of support that they need to continue to succeed. So I'm not going anywhere for at least 18 months—*[laughter]*—but after that, Michelle and I and Broderick and others who have been involved in this program, we intend to continue to help support young people.

Now, as we've always said, there's mutual responsibilities involved. So just as we're going to continue to be there for you, we expect you to continue to not only work hard and apply yourself, but also to help reach back and provide the kind of leadership and guidance. We want you to be role models for the young people that are coming behind you, starting obviously with your brothers and sisters, but then continuing to expand to others who may not have always had the same opportunities that you've had. And you've got to make sure that you're helping to not only conduct yourself in a way that gives them an idea of what it takes to succeed, but that you're also being hands on in helping them wherever you can.

One of the things that I think we all have to understand as a country is that we all do better when everybody has a shot. This idea that somehow we succeed just on our own is just not true. Nobody does, not even the President of the United States, maybe especially not the

President of the United States. There are thousands, tens of thousands of people—starting with my parents, and now my family—but tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people who helped me succeed and continue to help me succeed every single day. And that's the nature of how any society works is, we support each other. And so you've got to, as beneficiaries of a lot of support from some wonderful family members, you've got to make sure that you are showing that same leadership going forward. All right?

Couldn't be prouder of you. I can't wait to see all the great things that you're going to achieve. Congratulations. And, parents, way to go. Good job. All right. Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:24 p.m. in the Blue Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Gerard Contee, student, McKiley Technology Education Campus in Washington, DC; and Cabinet Secretary Broderick D. Johnson, in his capacity as Chair of the "My Brother's Keeper" Task Force.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : White House mentorship and leadership program, graduation ceremony.

Names: Belay, Mike; Brooks, Malik; Contee, Gerard; Edmunds, Chuck; Hawkins, Jerron; Holder, Eric H., Jr.; Johnson, Broderick D.; Larrain, Jonathan; McQueen, Noah; Mkumbuzi, Bernard; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Russell, Marcus; West, Joseph.

Subjects: White House : Mentorship and leadership program; White House Office : “My Brother's Keeper” initiative; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Cabinet Secretary.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500433.