

Princeton University Class Day, June 4, 2018

Transcript, remarks by Sen. Cory Booker

SENATOR CORY BOOKER: Hello, everybody. I cannot tell you what it means to me to be invited to be here with you on this exceptional weekend, this very long, long weekend that you all have graduating. I want to say, first of all, that I want to give gratitude to the folks that actually thought to invite me to some of your student leadership, but I also, on this day, think it's really appropriate to give thanks to the entire community that has created this day, and this special weekend for you.

I want to thank the faculty and the trustees. I want to thank the staff members. I want to thank all of those who make up the community, especially those who often don't get thank you's. The people who manicured the lawns, the people who clean buildings, the people who scrub toilets.

[APPLAUSE]

And I want to encourage everyone to understand, on your highest moments in life, it's so important to let gratitude be your gravity. To let it keep you grounded. To understand that whatever the accomplishment is, you're not here on your own. I've been to many graduations, but to see the people that you all brought on the stage and honored, especially Barbara Baldwin, and Tom Sparich.

Understanding that these folks, who you see every day, are integral parts of your community. That shows me the character of this class, and already, before I've even really begun my remarks, I just want you to know how special I think that this community that you all have created is. You can give a smattering of applause if you want.

[APPLAUSE]

I'll take a smattering. All right, so you guys invited a Jersey senator to give your remarks. I have a lot of Jersey pride. I get really ticked off when people make fun of New Jersey. I cannot tell you how many fights I've had on the Senate floor over Jersey respect. You know, I walk around, and talk to all the other senators, and tell them that their states, and their dagnab mottos, really, are stealing from our state.

You know, Colorado thinks it's all about Rocky Mountains, and brag about their beer. The first brewery was in the United States of America — first brewery in the United States of America was in Hoboken, New Jersey, dagnabit. I get ticked off when I bump into those guys from North Carolina. Thom Tillis, for crying out loud. They say they're first in flight. Well, I'll have you know that the first recorded balloon flight — excuse me, the first recorded flight in American history was a balloon flight right here in New Jersey. I get upset.

Even Florida, the Sunshine State, for crying out — oh, listen you Floridians. Back off, because when the sun goes down on the Sunshine State, it is a New Jersey invention, the light bulb, that keeps the light on. And even you Virginians, for crying out loud. What's your motto? Virginia is for lovers. For crying out loud, think about our history, people. The drive-in movie theater was invented in New Jersey, and there was a whole lot of loving going on there.

My mom used to torture me as a kid, saying I was conceived in a double feature of Sidney Poitier, "In the Heat of the Night," and "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner." I have so much Jersey pride; if you cut me, I'd bleed Jersey. But I want to tell you, I wasn't born in the state. My mom and dad met in Washington, DC.

And so today, based upon me not being the only one here that's not born and bred in New Jersey, this is a very large class. By the power invested in me by the people of New Jersey, as one of the highest-ranking officials in all of the great Garden State, I want to tell you, the entire class, great Class of 2018, just like Bruce Bon Jovi and blueberries, just like red tomatoes and Red Man, you are all now officially products of New Jersey.

[APPLAUSE]

And that means I expect you to defend our state everywhere you go. Now, I want you to know that I want to impart to you, really, one conclusion that may be different than you already have in your mind. The conclusion is very simple. I want to impart to you all that you are powerful. Now, look, this is a day where you're graduating from Princeton University. Sadly, I have to say — as a graduate of Stanford — the number one ranked university in all of America. But that's not your power.

I've learned in my life that power has nothing to do about the degrees you hold, or the title you have. Power is not measured by position. I want you to understand that you're powerful in a way that one of my favorite authors wrote about when she said the most common way people give up their power is not realizing they have it in the first place. Those words are from Alice Walker, who wrote powerfully, and movingly, and compellingly about what real power is.

I want you all, hopefully, at the end of my remarks, to think about your power in a different way. And as you strive to put more lines on your resume, to realize that that resume will never ever reflect the truth of how powerful you are. I want you to, perhaps, do like I do, which is to reject the "great man" theory of history, which writes about powerful people in powerful positions with powerful titles that moved our nation forward, and to actually remember that this nation was shaped and formed most by the people you're never going to read about in history books. And I want to —

[APPLAUSE]

And I want to exhibit this in a simple story that really has two parts. One part of the story I've known all of my life, and the other part, the second half of the story, I learned about in recent years that just knocked me over. Well, the first half of the story I've told many times. It's sort of my origin story, which I bet for a lot of people in your audience, because all of us come from

humble backgrounds, if you go further enough back in our family trees, there's difficulties, there's oppression, there's poverty.

And for me, I heard about it all the time growing up. It was my father and my mother telling me about their humble background. Now, my dad had this way of exaggerating his childhood. It's like you know, son, I was poor. But now he would heckle me if he heard me say don't tell those people from the Princeton community that I was poor. I was just-- I was just po', P-O. I couldn't afford the other two letters. I was just a po' boy from North Carolina. And my father's crazy.

The weather — I never wanted to go to North Carolina because I thought it was just always outrageous. And one day he started his story by telling me, son, let me tell you about the time the tsunami hit my town. And I'm like, Dad, you're from the mountains of North Carolina. There is no way a tsunami hit your town. He's like, boy, don't you disrespect me. You know the Bible. Thou shall honor thy mother and father. It happened a long time ago before the internet. So you can't look it up, but it happened.

Well, my dad was born poor in a humble background, and yet he was able to, when his momma couldn't take care of him, he was raised by a black family in the town that took him in. When he had no college tradition in my family, it was folks in a church that put dollars in a collection plate so my father could afford to enroll himself in a small HBCU called North Carolina Central. When he gets down to college, and starts fighting for opportunities, he starts seeing lots of folks showing up — black folks and white folks, Christians and Jews, involving themselves in the civil rights movement, bashing down doors to opportunity.

He lands in Washington, DC, where he meets my mom, and starts to find himself, because of activism of others, not just his hard work and grit, becoming the first African-American hired by this company, and then that company, and then he becomes IBM's first black salesmen hired in the entire northern Virginia-Washington, DC, area.

[APPLAUSE]

And this gets to the story. My father and mother suddenly are looking for a place to live in the New York City metropolitan area because my dad gets this promotion, and they start shopping for homes. And my mom said our guideline at first was just to find great public schools, and they ended up looking at many of the homes were in white neighborhoods.

But when they would show up in the northern suburbs of New Jersey and white communities, the real estate agents would see them, and then suddenly tell them oh, I'm so sorry, this house, it's already been sold. Or oh gosh, the homeowners decided to pull it off the market. They're not going to be sold. They were literally steered away from white communities. And my parents were frustrated. So they looked around and they found this small storefront operation with a small group of folk — black folk, and white folk, Christian folk, and Jewish, got together, and decided to try to break this housing segregation.

The year was 1969. I was just a baby, and my parents worked with them, and these incredible lawyers came, and decided that they would actually set up a sting operation. And my parents

were pretty psyched. So they would go look at a house. They would be told the house was sold or pulled off the market. They would leave, and right away, a white couple would show up, and they would find out the house was still for sale.

Well, on the house that my parents fell in love with, the house that I would eventually grow up in, my father and mother showed up. They were told the house was sold. The white couple can find out the house was still for sale. They put a bid on the house. The bid was accepted. Papers were drawn up, and on the day of the closing, instead of the white couple showing up at the real estate agents office, my dad did, and a volunteer lawyer.

Well, they walk into the real estate agent's office, and the lawyer had probably been preparing his speech all day. He marches up to the real estate agent, and says sir, you are in violation of New Jersey Fair Housing Law, and starts to give him this great, powerful civil rights speech as my dad sat there and said, "Yeah, yeah." But then all of a sudden, the real estate agent stands up, and punches my dad's lawyer in the face, and sickens a dog on my dad.

Now, let me tell you right now, every time my dad would tell the story, the dog would get bigger as I grew up. Eventually, I'd be walking around a house, and my dad would say, boy, don't you dare walk around this house like you hit a triple. You were born on third base, young man. Don't you know all the things I had to do to get you in this home? I had to fight a pack of wolves to get you in this house.

And so I grew up in New Jersey in an incredible community that was nurturing and kind. That was good to my family, and it was an incredible privilege. I grew up with parents who would never let me forget where I came from, the struggles that went on, that I owed a debt that I couldn't pay back, that I had to pay forward. That I was where I was because of this conspiracy of love, and they told me to get out into the world.

And my father was impatient. I went to Stanford, to Oxford, to Yale. My dad's like come on, boy, you've got more degrees than the month of July, but you ain't hot. Life's not about the degrees you get. It's about the service that you give. And so I went, while still in Yale, Austin, moved into Newark, New Jersey. And I always say I got my BA from Stanford, but my PhD on the streets of Newark, learning from the wisdom, and the kindness of so many people who embraced me, and gave me my first shot-- encouraged me, changed my love life direction, encouraged me to get into politics.

To this day, the map of the central ward of Newark sits behind me in my Senate office because those were the folks that pushed me into politics, believed in me, took a risk on me. To this day, I still live in the central ward of Newark. The only senator that lives in a low income, inner city community because I love my state, and I love her largest city.

[APPLAUSE]

I wish we had time for me to tell you all the lessons I learned in the decade or two that I fought in Newark politics, joined spirit and soul with so many incredible people, but I want to get to the second half of the story. And it involves just a few years back, when this great state elected me to

be their United States senator. Now, I'll tell you this, it was this time, again, where gratitude should be your gravity. When you get elected to be in this position that's beyond your parents' even dreams.

My mom has a saying. She says behind every successful child is an astonished parent. And my mom was astonished. You're a United States senator? You wouldn't make your bed. Wouldn't mow the lawn. But the challenge of my going down to Washington from my mom and I was at six days before I was elected in a special election elected in October, sworn in in October. Six days before I was elected, my father died.

Now, death can end a life, but it can't end the love, and my father's spirit was with me, but I missed him. I missed his presence. I missed his warmth. I missed his hugs. I missed him teasing me. I missed him making fun of me. I missed him reminding me to keep my feet on the ground. I'd let my head get too big.

So when the wisdom of my mom, and some of my incredible campaign team. They're like, look, before you take your oath, before you go to the Vice President, Joe Biden, and raise your hand, the last thing you're going to do before you become a United States senator, you're going to go to the offices, and sit down with Congressman John Lewis.

And I'll tell you, my mom and I went to go see Congressman Lewis, and we walked into his office. He had prepared a spread of food for us, and his office look like a Civil Rights Museum, except he was in every picture. And my mom and I were in awe, and the food was laid out, and this is John Lewis. When he was your age, he was leaving his university to go join Martin Luther King. He became one of the original Freedom Riders. He, at 25, became the head of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

He was one of only five speakers on the March on Washington, the last one alive. He was considered one of the bravest men in all of the civil rights movement because he got beaten time, and time again on freedom rides during sit-ins. On the Edmund Pettus Bridge, he had his skull fractured by the baton of an Alabama state trooper, knocked unconscious, bleeding that bridge red.

This is a hero to me, a giant, and I'm sitting in his office, and the man is so humble. He is just so kind. You can see it in his eyes, and he wouldn't even let my mom and I get up to go get food. He's taking some grits, and serving us. And then he's trying to tell me how grateful he is to me, how much it means to him that I should be the fourth popularly elected African-American senator in the history of our country. That I am the manifestation of the dreams that he had, the work that he did. I was overwhelmed.

I now serve with John Lewis, and I tell you, every time I'm with him, I'm still overwhelmed. But what is amazing about him is he is this teacher to me in what is power. You see, it's not about his title. It's not about his position. It's about the truth that he lives every day. I see the way he treats folk. They may be senators, or cabinet secretaries, but I also see how he treats the folk that serve the food, that clean the hallways. He evidences to me the truth that you all should always remember. That someone who is nice to you, but rude to the waiter, is not a nice person.

[APPLAUSE]

He lives this life that I talk to him, and he doesn't complain. Life is not about collecting complaints or gathering grievances. He's always positive and proactive. And yeah, folk get in his face sometimes, but another lesson he's taught me that I share with you is, hey, you don't have to attend every argument you're invited to.

He lets me understand what the true definition of patriotism is. It's not how loud you sing the national anthem, or the flag pin you might have on, or all of those symbols of patriotism. He teaches that patriotism means love of country, and you cannot love your country unless you love your country men and women.

[APPLAUSE]

You love them all. And he shows me that you can't lead the people if you don't love the people. He shows me that the best language you can speak is not mastery of the English language, or speak in another tongue. Your first language always must be kindness. And so this, to me, is what power is about.

But in that first meeting, we get up to leave, and now I'm going from one side of the Capitol building to the other side of the Capitol building to see the vice president, and become a United States senator, and somebody should fact check me on this, but I think the only time in the history of America has a United States senator been walking to go get sworn in, and their mother was walking next to them, lecturing them the entire way.

My mom's like boy, don't forget where you come from. Don't forget the blood, sweat, and tears of your ancestors. Don't forget that the title does not make the man. The man or woman must make the title.

[APPLAUSE]

So I get sworn in. I look on both sides of the aisle — the fine people in Washington that are examples to me of what leadership is about. John Lewis and others I've now found that embody this ideal that the world has changed. As Pablo Coelho says, "The world is changed by your example, not your opinion." And I was so excited to be in the Senate, and to mix it up. To become a scrapper for the state of New Jersey, but one day I decided to do what many senators do that have a high self-regard for themselves. I decided to write a book.

With a name like mine, you've got to write a book. And so — I promise that's the corniest joke you'll hear today. And so I decided I'd go back, but if you have a father like mine, you've got to go back, and fact check everything. I mean, how big was the dog, actually? And so I start going back to try to get the stories of my life, and fact check them. And I go back to find the story of me moving into New Jersey, which I told so many times. I go search for the head of the Fair Housing Council from the 1960s, and guess what?

She was very easy to find because she is still head of the North Jersey Fair Housing Council today. Her name is Ms. Lee Porter, and she is 92 years old, still leading the Fair Housing movement here in New Jersey. Now she's not representing black folks, but she's representing same-sex couples, and Muslim folks who are still being denied housing because of who they are. And when I brought her to my office, I'm not joking. I literally got on my knees before her and thanked her.

How embarrassing and shameful, in fact, that I never said thank you to the woman who did so much for me. Every one of us here in this audience, every one of us could probably think of people, especially on a day like this, that deserves our gratitude. A high school teacher, a neighbor, someone to say thank you to. Well, we started talking, and it was amazing to me. She recounts the story. She confirms the facts and details.

But I want to meet the lawyers who are involved in all of that struggle. I asked her for the lawyer that took a punch for my family, a guy named Marty Friedman. She says I'm so sorry, but he passed away. That hurt that I never said thank you to him, but she says look, the man who organized all of the lawyers, you can meet him. His name is Arthur Lestman, I found Mr. Lestman thanks to her, and called him up. And I said sir, my name is Corey Booker. He's like, I know where you are. And I'm like all right, sir, well, you know what you did for — I know what I did. I said, OK, sir. Let me hear the story.

And he tells me this incredible story, and it's amazing. He confirms the fact — by the way, I found out how big the dog was. It was not a pack of wolves. And then my heart is so shocked and moved when I end the conversation by asking him the simple question. I mean, this blew me away-- the second half of the story I never knew. I said to him, sir, I need to understand one thing. He's like, what?

I want to know why. Why would you at that point in your career, you were just starting off as a lawyer, you had just put it out a shingle. You were struggling to make it. Why would you help black families try to move into northern New Jersey? And the answer he gave me floored me. He said well, I remember the day that I made the decision. And I go, the day? Well, what day was it? Was it July of this? No. He goes, Cory, I remember that day. It was a Monday. And I'm like a Monday, OK.

And he goes, I remember it was a Monday because the day before on that Sunday, I was home sitting comfortably on my couch, watching TV. It was a Sunday evening movie. I actually know the name of the movie. It was "Judgement at Nuremberg." Now, this was back in the days when we had like three and a half channels on a TV. You had to get up and change the remote — change without a remote, change it with your hands. And he's sitting comfortably on his couch in Bergen County, New Jersey, watching TV.

And then suddenly, something rare happens. They broke away from the movie to cover the news. And what they covered was they went straight to Alabama because these marchers had started in Selma, led by a 20-something-year-old young man named John Lewis, and they had tried to march to Montgomery in protest of a murder of an African American man, and voting rights, and they got trapped, and stopped on this bridge by a line of Alabama state troopers.

And he said he watched in horror how these folks stood there, and they decided that they would turn around, but first, they would pray. And he said just as they got down to kneel and pray, suddenly, the Alabama troopers shot gas in on them. He went from watching judgment at Nuremberg to his own country, as people had tear gas raining down on them. And they got raced in by these Alabama state troopers with billy clubs, and he watched with horror, Ms. Boynton, beaten over the head, falling to her face. Others — John Lewis' head cracked open.

He said he watched in horror that this was happening his nation, and it was just too much. He couldn't just get up and caught up in a state of sedentary agitation where he was so upset about what he was watching on TV but didn't do anything about it. So he went to work the next day on Monday, and sat down with the only other lawyer that was there, which was his partner Leo, and the two of them sat there.

He said to Leo, we got to go to Alabama, and Leo laughed. Not because it was funny, but because it was preposterous. They couldn't afford a plane ticket. They couldn't even afford to close the doors to their business one day. They were struggling to make it. And frustrated, they just sat there for a little while, and then suddenly, in essence, they thought to themselves and said, why don't we just do the best we can with what we have, where we are? And they got on the phone and started calling around.

And they found this young woman with a small organization called the Fair Housing Council. They were calling around to see who might need lawyers, and when they called her, she was like, oh, thank you, Jesus. Thank you, thank you. I need lawyers. And they started to get working. That was 1965. Well, four years later, they get a case file. He gets a case file handed to him the two names on it, Cary and Carolyn Booker, my parents.

I've been thinking these years so often about that moment on that couch when you're comfortable. That moment in their office. I think about that moment, and how these folks did not allow their inability to do everything to undermine their determination to do something.

[APPLAUSE]

How they didn't surrender to this idea that, oh, look at these powerful people, and powerful places. The governor of Alabama saying segregation now, segregation — they didn't just sit there, and look at the powerful people saying powerful words, and surrender their strength. How they, in that one small moment, they understood that to do nothing is not only to surrender your power, but to do nothing is actually to contribute to the very injustices that you're witnessing.

That in so many ways, the opposite of justice is not injustice, it is inaction, it is apathy, it is silence. They understood that it's not enough to say, I am not a bigot. It is so important to say I am an agent of love. Is so important not just to say I am not hateful, you have to be an agent of love.

It is not enough to say, I am not sexist, I am not homophobic, I am not cruel, or mean. It must be an activist decision that you make, and not need not be big. One decision in a world where we

are so more intricately interwoven than we know, one decision by one person on one day ripples out into community.

That patriotism of the people on the bridge. The love of country, which means you love all your countrymen and women. That love on that bridge — one day, people whose names I don't know, standing up unleashed that force of love into the world, and it instantaneously jumped 1,000 miles, and changed the heart of one man sitting comfortably on a couch in New Jersey who would then go on with his patriotism, with his love, with his activism, small acts, volunteering on the weekends.

He would go on to change generations yet unborn. I would not be here today if it wasn't for that chain reaction of love built on one action on one day-- one person to another person.

[APPLAUSE]

It is a virtuous virus. It's a cascade of love that we all have the power to do. Never forget that the biggest thing you can do on most every day is often just a small act of kindness, decency, love, and caring. And so to the great Class of 2018, I say again, from where I started, you are powerful. Power is not on how physically strong you are. Its on how morally consistent you are.

You are powerful. Power does not come from your title, it comes from you telling your truth every single day in your smallest of actions. What you decide to do with the dollars you spend. How you noticed the dignity of the person on the street. How you give one act of kindness more than you thought. 2018, you are powerful.

[APPLAUSE]

And I am telling you right now, if you show up — if you show up every day, no matter what's on the news, no matter what someone in power said, if you show up, and you give a little, care a little, help a little, heal a little, listen a little, love a little every single day, if you don't let the darkness of the world snuff out your light, if you don't let the hatred of another make you cynical and turn your back.

If you live a life committed to being powerful on a daily basis, to being powerful hour to hour with accepting your responsibility, with being an agent, then you will make your ancestors proud. Because today, I am telling you, you are your ancestors wildest dreams. But for the dream to truly be real, for the dream and hope of this country that is in the balance in this moral moment, it's going to take an awful lot of power.

So my hope today is that you leave here, and be powerful. Let this world feel you every day. Walk into every room, go to every place, and embrace the world with your spirit, and with your truth. And if you do that, if you live that way, if you strut like you are powerful, then I promise you, the generations yet unborn will know of your light, and your love. Thank you very much. Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

