

University of New Orleans Commencement Address, May 19, 2021 by Dr. Raphael Cassimere, Jr., Emeritus **Seraphia D. Leyda Professor of History, UNO**---- introduced by President John Nicklow

Thank you Mr. President for your kind and generous introduction.--- Thank you also for the great job **you're** doing in restoring UNO's former preeminence.

Let me also acknowledge the presence of all of the distinguished officials and members of the platform,-- administrators, faculty, -- family, and friends,-- but **especially**, to all of the graduates.

I've addressed high school and grade school commencements, but **none** is as challenging as addressing university graduates who encompass a wide cross section of **baccalaureates**, but also **master's and doctoral** candidates.

Often the speaker talks as if **all** of the graduates are baccalaureates in their early 20's getting ready for their **first** professional careers, even though many of you are in your 30s, 40s and beyond. Others of you are Master's and Doctoral candidates, in mid career.

Sadly, this present pandemic prevents all of the individual candidates from sitting together as **one** class, but the Class of 2021 is a conglomerate representing, the **arts, business, engineering, and sciences**; undergrads and graduate students ---but it is still **one** class.

Usually, commencement speakers and their speeches are soon forgotten. When I attended my 1st UNO commencement 55 years ago, I most remember, not the **speaker**, but my 93 year old grandmother, **Grandma**.

As usual she was two hours early. As it turned out this was her last public appearance; --two months later she was in heaven. Grandma was frail, but oh so **proud** to see her grandson graduate from this **white** university.

You see, she had been born during Reconstruction. Early in her life she witnessed **exciting** changes for members of her race. Black men, including former slaves, were elected to high offices. Her **husband, father, and grandfathers**, had won the right to vote, only to have it taken away by the end of the 19th century by voter suppression and violent attacks by hate groups. Unfortunately, she did not get to vote until she was 75.

But, Grandma always remained **optimistic** about the future, even during the **darkest** days of racial segregation and subordination. She continually encouraged her children and grandchildren to "**look like somebody and act like somebody, and people will treat you like somebody,-- and if they don't ---- you demand that they do.**"

She referred to UNO as "**white**;" and initially, it **was** ----an **all-white administration and faculty**, including a few who were openly **hostile**. Black students were barred from the school cafeteria and all **non academic** functions, but over the years through student protests,--- black

and white, ----as well as some sympathetic faculty, UNO **slowly** ----**very slowly** became more racially **diverse** and more **inclusive**.

However, not only was LSUNO completely **white-dominated**, but it was also white-**male** dominated. The only **female** administrator was an obvious choice -----**the dean of women**. During the first decade, no woman headed an academic department or college or division.

Throughout those early years, however, one thing united the campus despite racial and ethnic differences: **academic excellence**. If you survived the horrific flunk-out rate, many people outside the campus considered you "**smart**."

Hence, most of the survivors were more than a little cocky. This sense of excellence created a sense of togetherness among most students.

One of those early students was a recent financial benefactor, **Henry Singer**, who recalled:-- "**my 19th century prejudices on racial and gender equality, were challenged, and the fallacies of those views exposed. UNO prepared me, and other students for success in a different world than that we were brought up in.**"

Similarly, during **my** nearly half-century here as both a student and faculty member, I watched with satisfaction and pride how UNO became more **racially, gender, and culturally** inclusive. We learned that often we, ----**black and white**, ---**Christian and non-Christian**, had more common **similarities** than **differences**.

I was so surprised to learn that **many**, if not **most**, New Orleanians, **black and white**, cooked **red beans** on Monday, and **chicken** on Sunday,--- but on Saturday, you were on your own, ---and had to hustle for Friday's **seafood** leftovers,--- if any.

We learned **tolerance**. We didn't have to **accept** different beliefs, but **tolerate** them. Then we became more **tolerant**. As a result, we got along better with most people. I think above all, most of us learned,--- like Henry Singer, if we were open-minded, we could shed old **prejudices** and change old **ways**. However, we would have to change **ourselves**, as well.

Nelson Mandela, the great South African freedom fighter, who was imprisoned for 27 years, only later to become President of a new and more **inclusive** nation, often observed; **the hardest person for you to change,--- is the same person looking back at you in the mirror. Change yourself!** he cautioned, then you can help change others. ----- I'll let you in on a secret; ----over the years, **I've** changed----- **a lot!**

I don't see the same person looking back at me in the mirror that I saw 50 years ago. I now have **less black hair**, and added **about 30 pounds**, but I think that I've become a better person.-- I gained more knowledge from my faculty colleagues; I became a better teacher by listening to and observing my students. I learned **humility** by **observing and listening** to, and working **with** the campus support staff, clerical, food service, and maintenance personnel.

Often, I would tell my students, "**don't give up on people because people can change.**"
Some will not, but many will change.

However, I was greatly disturbed by a recent article which asked: "**Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the back of the cafeteria?**" Well, before the pandemic, my wife and I often visited UNO's cafeteria. But we did not see all the black kids sitting in the back **here**.

To the contrary, I watched diversity in action. Students of all races and backgrounds: **black, white, Hispanic, Asian**, ----all sitting and interacting throughout the cafeteria **together**.

If Grandma would return, ----but she won't---- she's having such a great time in heaven, -- but if she did return, she would no longer see a "**whites only cafeteria in a white university.**"

Today, Grandma would see a more **gender, racially, and culturally diverse** university where students of all races, genders, religions and culture are represented across the campus, in student government, athletics and social and service groups.

Grandma would be **so pleased** that since her death as a result of the civil rights revolution, more progressive voting laws were passed. Consequently we elected **women, African American, Hispanic and Asian Americans** to Congress.

We elected a **woman** governor, and numerous **black** mayors, men and women. Gender equity is reflected in city, parish, and state government across our state. **And** not only had we the audacity to hope for it, but we elected a **black man as president, and a black woman as vice president!**

But Grandma would be alarmed and saddened by a rash of new voter suppression proposals, and a disturbing resurgence of violent hate groups.

So---, as I close, I challenge **each** of you, ---whether you're at the **beginning**,--- or **mid-point**,--- or **near the end** of your careers. Which "*mem'ries will linger on, when your years at UNO are gone?*" I urge you to use your experiences here at UNO as a **template in racial, gender, and cultural diversity and tolerance**.

Don't forget it when you leave, but bring it with you to the larger society, which unfortunately is becoming much **less diverse** and **much more separate**, and so much **more intolerant**. Don't laugh at bigoted jokes! Don't go along with hateful speech targeted against any particular individual or group.

Please! Take a **stand** for a more **inclusive** and **tolerant** society. **Please!** Take a stand against voter suppression.---- **Please!** Take a **stand against** hate group resurgence. **Please!**----- Take a **stand** --- even if you think you stand **alone**. But you **won't** be **alone**. If **you** stand, you'll find others **standing** with you. **Do this!** It's guaranteed to "*keep you true to the silver and blue.*"

Class of 2021, whether you're here today in person, or watching virtually:

Congratulations! God speed for the future! I salute each of you! -----

Baccalaureates! -----Masters! -----Doctors -----

Thank you!

As I pondered my remarks tonight, I remembered a **heated** conversation I once had with an NAACP official. He gave me an unintended compliment: "**You always pull for the underdogs!**" Certainly, I was not the **first** person to pull for underdogs: **Jesus Christ** pulled for underdogs,--- including me. And so did **Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Martin L. King, Jr.** and **countless civil rights activists** **Tonight**, . I'm so **proud** and **humbled** to be numbered in that company.

However, my personal **joy** is **tempered** because so many contributors to whatever success I accomplished, are no longer with us: including my slave ancestors who refused to give up hope even during the darkest times of enslavement. Many African captives jumped overboard to escape the agony of slavery. However, I thank God that not **all** of my ancestors **jumped**, or how could I vindicate their hopes that life would get **better** for their **future** generations?

I also thank God for my fore-parents who, even amidst **slavery, racial segregation, and subordination**, always modeled **personal integrity** which they passed on to future generations. They taught us to value **time**,---- to use it **wisely** and **productively**; not just for personal gain, but for the greater good. They admonished that **lost time** could never be **regained**. None of them achieved great material wealth, but they were **rich** ----- in **goodness, kindness** and **mercy**, as they strove to help build a better community.

My parents, **Estelle** and **Raphael**, taught their children the importance of a true relationship with God, the source of every good gift. They told us that we **truly** serve **God** by serving **others**. **Racism** and **poverty** hampered their own educational journey, but they passed on

their **thirst** for knowledge to their children and grandchildren. They listened attentively as we recited the time tables and spelling lists. They, along with my siblings, were my initial teachers. Even before I entered school I learned to read. **Graduation** at **every** level, from kindergarten through college was a major sign of success. Therefore, their attendance at **every** commencement was a **must**.

Inez, my wife of 52 years, has been my **faithful companion** and **fellow laborer in Freedom's Vineyard**. She is my **fashion, literary, and social** critic. Seldom will I completely ignore her advice. My **children**, sometimes, do not seem to be **listening**, but their wise **actions** prove otherwise. Their continual **love** and **support** for each other confirm our effective teaching. My **grandchildren** not only **tell** me, but **exhibit** their love for me with their effervescent **hugs** and **smiles**. All of my other relatives showed me support in words and actions. This includes my wife's relatives who took **"in-law"** out of our relationship; we simply became members of the same family. My students almost always knew when to offer **encouraging words** that were worth more than **money**.

Countless fellow **heroes** and **sheroes**, whose unselfish efforts helped to make a more **just** and **inclusive** society, played a major role in my accomplishments. Some are here tonight. They may **never** be formally **inducted** into a hall of fame, but my **love** and **gratitude** for all of them will **always** be **inscribed** within my **heart**.

So, on behalf of my **ancestors, fore-parents, parents, siblings, wife, children, grandchildren, other relatives, teachers, students, fellow laborers in Freedom's Vineyard**, and especially the **underdogs**, I **humbly, proudly, and gratefully** accept this most prestigious recognition. From the bottom of my old heart, **THANK YOU!**

LOUISIANA JUSTICE HALL OF FAME



2022 Inductees

Raphael Cassimere, Jr.

Wilbert Ellis

Judge Elizabeth Foote & Judge W. Ross Foote

Jeffrey W. Hall

Arthur S. Lawson, Jr.

Willy J. Martin, Jr.

Harold Pierite, Sr.

Kelly D. Ward

Julian C. Whittington

Dr. Raphael Cassimere, Jr.

A 6TH GENERATION NEW ORLEANIAN, RAPHAEL CASSIMERE, JR. BECAME THE first black instructor at the University of New Orleans in 1969. Two years later, he received his first Ph.D in history from Pennsylvania's Lehigh University. For 36 years, he was a full-time member of the UNO's history department and retired at the rank of Seraphia D. Leyda University Professor.



Active in the NAACP since 1960, he has held numerous offices. In 2020 ... he has served as a voting delegate for 59 consecutive years. The Louisiana Board of Regents created the Raphael Cassimere, Jr., Endowed Professorship in African American History in 2015, and in 2021, UNO bestowed the Doctor of Humane Letters Degree upon him for his contributions. He has been appointed to positions by Gov. John McKeithen and Gov. Edwin Edwards. He has served as president of the New Orleans NAACP Youth Council, LA State Youth Conference, chairman of the Southwest Regional States for an unprecedented 11 terms. He has also served on the board of directors of the Crisis Publishing Company, the Historical Pharmaceutical Museum Commission, the Board of Governmental Research, and the Supreme Court of LA Historical Society.

Cassimere was awarded the A.P. Tureaud Black Citizenship Medal in 1982, the highest award given by the NAACP. Then was selected in 1984 as the initial recipient of the UNO-AMOCO Distinguished Undergraduate Teaching Award, and in 1994 he was awarded the UNO Liberal Arts College Distinguished Alumnus of the Year. In 1996, he was awarded one of three Seraphia D. Leyda University Teaching Fellowships, which recognized "outstanding faculty members for their accomplishments as teachers and reflects the university's continuing commitment to excellence in teaching."

He is married to the former Inez Hale, a retired master teacher from the New Orleans public school system. They have two children, Raphael Martin Cassimere and Raquelle A. Cassimere Boatner, and one granddaughter and one grandson.