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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT VIRGINIA TECH COMMENCEMENT

Blacksburg, Virginia

12:49 P.M. EDT

MRS. OBAMA: Thank you all. Thank you so much. Well, hello, Hokies! (Applause.) I like saying that. It is such a pleasure and an honor to be here today to celebrate the Virginia Tech class of 2012. Way to go. Way to go.

I want to start by thanking President Steger for that very kind introduction, as well as the faculty, the staff, the board. I also want to thank Senator Warner for his wonderful remarks, especially the "call your mom" part. I like that. I want to thank him for his outstanding service and leadership on behalf of this state. And Senator, I accept your challenge -- (laughter) -- but you've just got to know, I play to win. (Laughter.) All right? I also want to recognize Governor McDonnell and Mrs. McDonnell, who are here not just as Virginia’s Governor and First Lady but as proud parents. Congratulations to both of you and your family.

And graduates, I have to join in in taking a moment to thank those extraordinary people up in the bleachers with the cameras and the beaming smiles on their faces. Yes, I’m talking again about your families -- the folks who pushed you and believed in you; the folks who always picked up the phone when you called, even when you were just calling to ask for money. (Laughter.) Their love and support has sustained you every step of the way, so, again, let’s give them another round of applause, right? (Applause.)

And finally, to the class of 2012, you all -- congratulations. Congratulations. We are so proud of you for making it to this day. We are so proud of what you’ve achieved and who you’ve become. And I know that as one of your commencement speakers today, I’m supposed to offer you all kinds of wisdom and advice and life lessons. But the truth is, like so many people across this country and around the world, I have been following the journey of this school. I have witnessed the strength and spirit of the Hokie Nation. And I think that you all already learned plenty of lessons here at Virginia Tech.

In fact, I feel like all of you have so much to teach all of us. And that’s really what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about the lessons that all of us in this country can learn from this university. I want to talk about what we can learn from the community you’ve built, from the service you’ve performed, and from the future that you all are inventing together.
And I want to start with the lesson that you all have taught us about the power of community. As you all know and was mentioned earlier, the very first student at this university walked 26 miles just to enroll here. Now, to normal people that might seem a little excessive, but to anyone who knows anything about Hokie pride, it's that level of enthusiasm that's pretty much par for the course here, right? Whether you’re walking around campus decked out in your maroon and orange or cheering your hearts out to the opening beats of "Enter Sandman," few can match the school spirit on display here at Virginia Tech.

I even hear that you’ve bred your own variety of flower -- a maroon and orange daylily known as the “VT Spirit.” And during your first days at this school you learned that when someone asks you “What is a Hokie?” -- what’s your answer?

AUDIENCE: I am!

MRS. OBAMA: What is a Hokie?

AUDIENCE: I am!

MRS. OBAMA: And when someone says “Let’s go,” you answer --

AUDIENCE: Hokies!

MRS. OBAMA: They told me you’d do that. (Laughter.) That's very cool.

And whether you’re celebrating your triumphs or coming together in times of tragedy, what is clear is that you all didn’t just choose to attend a school, you chose to be part of a community. And that feeling of belonging, those connections to your classmates and professors, I know for so many of you that’s what has made your time here so special.

And I know that some of you might be feeling a little sad about leaving the community that you’ve found here in Blacksburg. But here’s the thing, graduates, the Hokie community didn’t just happen. It didn’t just exist on its own. All of you created it. You worked hard for it. You nurtured it every step of the way. And I want you to know that you can do that again wherever your journey may take you.

Now, it’s going to be a little harder when you’re working a job and raising a family, juggling all the responsibilities of being adult. But I promise you that no matter where you wind up, you can create a thriving community of your own if you’re willing to put in the same kind of energy and effort that you invested here at Virginia Tech.

So that means continuing to show up -- but instead of showing up to games and extracurriculars, it might mean attending those town hall meetings, or going to that school assembly, or those neighborhood picnics. It means reaching out like you did to your classmates here at Virginia Tech — stopping by to welcome a new neighbor to your block, or bringing over a hot meal for someone who’s going through a hard time. And it means continuing to serve —
volunteering in your local school, cleaning up your local park, doing your part to help others in need.

And that brings me to the second lesson all of you at Virginia Tech have taught us -- and that is the power of service. Service is truly at the core of the Virginia Tech experience. It’s in your motto — Ut prosim, “That I may serve.” It was your founding purpose as a land grant school designed to open the doors of higher education to people from all walks of life. It’s the mission of your Corps of Cadets, men and women who have served this country in every armed conflict right from the beginning.

And every year, Virginia Tech students do tens of thousands of hours of community service here in Virginia and around the world. I understand this year, through the Relay for Life, you’ve raised more than half a million dollars to fight cancer. (Applause.) And at this year’s Big Event, more than 6,800 people volunteered on 990 different projects. And one of today’s graduates, a young man named Justin Graves, has committed himself to helping at least one person every single day. Way to go. As he put it, and these are his words -- Justin said, “Life is all about what you have done for other people.”

And you all haven’t just taught us about the power of service to lift up our families and heal our communities. You’ve also shown us that through service, we can heal ourselves. Over the past five years, students here have run memorial projects, building houses, hosting dance workshops, teaching French and German in local schools. You’ve created a fund to honor the sacrifice of Officer Deriek Crouse. And through these and so many other acts of service, large and small, you all have helped this community heal.

And years ago, I went through a similar process in my own life. It was back when I wasn’t much older than all of you. I had graduated from college and law school, and then I was - - like many of you will be -- up to my ears in debt. So I went out, and I got a job at one of the largest law firms in Chicago. And for a while, I was doing everything that I thought I was supposed to do. I had a fancy office, a big fat paycheck, and a really impressive line on my resume.

But then, when I was 26 years old, one of my best friends from college in the world died of cancer suddenly. She was gone. Less than a year later, my father passed away after battling multiple sclerosis for years. And just like that, I had lost two of the people I loved most in the world. That was it. And for months, I felt like I couldn’t breathe. I had this almost physical sense of loss, this gaping emptiness in my life -- and I couldn’t figure out how to fill it. I spent a lot of time mourning and questioning and reflecting. And I thought a lot about everything my dad had done for me during his life. I thought about how hard my dad worked to provide for our family. I thought about how, no matter how sick my father was feeling, he still woke up every morning and he did his job at the city water plant, and he did it without complaint or regret.

And you see, as I tell many people, my dad did not have the chance to attend college himself, but he and my mom they saved and they sacrificed. They poured everything they had into me and my brother because they wanted us to get an education they could only dream of. And while pretty much all of my college tuition was covered from loans and grants, my dad still
paid a small portion of that tuition himself. And let me tell you, every semester, he was
determined to pay his little contribution right on time. He was so proud to be sending his kids to
college, and he couldn’t bear the thought of me or my brother missing that registration deadline
because his check was late.

And as I grieved, I came to realize that the best way for me to honor my dad’s life was by
how I lived my own life. I realized that the best way to fill the hole he had left was to do for
other young people what he had done for me. So I left that fancy law firm, and I wound up
ultimately running a non-profit organization that trained young people for careers in public
service. Yes, I took a pay cut that made my mother cringe, and my new office wasn’t nearly as
nice as the old one.

But with every student I mentored, with every service project I organized, I felt my grief
recede just a little bit. I still miss my dad, and I always will. But slowly, I felt myself beginning
to heal. I felt myself becoming whole again.

And all of us go through periods of sadness like this. All of us do. We all feel, at times,
a little bit lost. And we all have some kind of emptiness that we’re searching to fill. And often,
it is only through serving others that we find what’s been missing in our own lives. And like so
many of you, through service I was able to find what I needed and carve a path for my life that
truly felt like my own.

And that brings me to the final lesson that all of you have taught us — and that is the
power of inventing the future. And I know you hear this phrase all the time here at Virginia
Tech, but today, I just want to pause for a moment on the word “invent.” Because the phrase
isn’t “succeed in the future,” it’s not “plan for the future” or “do the best you can in the future.”
It’s “invent the future.” And with those three words comes a simple message: a call to chart
your own course and live life on your own terms. And that’s a lesson that I first learned back
when I was a teenager.

And some of you may have grown up like I did -- in neighborhoods where kids had --
very few of them had the chance to go to college; where being teased for doing well in school
was just a fact of life; where well-meaning but misguided folks questioned whether a girl with
my background could get into the kinds of colleges I dreamed of attending. But I worked hard,
and I did my best to tune out those voices of doubt, including the ones inside my own head. And
eventually, I was accepted to Princeton, and I got that education that my dad had always dreamed
of.

But the truth is, graduates, there will always be folks who make assumptions about you
based on superficial things like where you’re from, or what you’re wearing, or how you look.
There will always be folks who judge you based on just one thing that you say or do; folks who
define you based on one isolated incident. And here at Virginia Tech, I know you all know a
thing or two about what that’s like.

But you also know that in the end, people can only define you if you let them. In the end,
it’s up to each of us to define ourselves. It’s up to each of us to invent our own future with the
choices we make and the actions we take. That’s why Norris Hall is now the home of the Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention, and West Ambler Johnston Hall will soon be reopened as a new residential college. That is why this year, on April 16th, you started attending class again, choosing to honor their lives by moving forward with your own.

And that is why, when you all are out there in the world and you meet someone and you tell them that you’re from Virginia Tech, and they say, “Huh, isn’t that the school where” -- I want you to interrupt them right there and say, “Yes, it is the school where we have some of the best academic programs and professors in the country.” That’s what you tell them. (Applause.) You tell them, "Yes, it is the school where students are passionate about serving their country and supporting each other. And by the way, which also has the best campus food you’ll ever eat." (Applause.) Who can say that?

You tell them, “Yes, it’s the school where we produce graduates who are leaders in their industries, and pillars of their communities, and who carry their Hokie pride with them every day for the rest of their lives." You say, “Yes, that is the school I attend. That is Virginia Tech.”

Graduates, that is who you are. That is what it means to be part of the Hokie Nation. And let me just tell you, we are all so proud of you. And we are all so inspired by you. And we are all determined to live up to the example you have set. And in those ways and so many others, yes, we are all still Hokies.

Congratulations again on everything that you’ve achieved. Thank you all. God bless you. (Applause.)