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From a Hurricane on Day One to the Twists and Turns Ahead – The Class of 2015 Graduates

Words of wisdom from author and historian Nathaniel Philbrick highlight Commencement ceremony, as 1,123 students earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees

May 16, 2015  |  Public Affairs Staff

Bristol, R.I. – Four years after arriving at Roger Williams with Hurricane Irene bearing down – and spending their first six days on campus with no classes, few events and activities, and, for a period of 48 hours, no electrical power – the 890 undergraduates in the Class of 2015 joined more than 200 adult learners on Saturday, under calmer skies, as they culminated their college careers at the University’s annual Commencement exercises.

In addition to awarding bachelor’s and master’s degrees to the candidates in front of a crowd of some 7,000 graduates and attendees, University President Donald J. Farish conferred honorary doctorates to two special guests: acclaimed author and historian Nathaniel D. Philbrick; and Timothy E. Baxter ’83, ’13P, president of Samsung Electronics America and an RWU alumnus, parent and trustee.

In delivering the keynote Commencement address, Philbrick – author of In the Heart of the Sea (2000), Mayflower (2007) and Bunker Hill (2013), among other nonfiction bestsellers – noted the historical significance of the land on which the ceremony took place:
“Here at the southern tip of the Mount Hope peninsula, we are at a place that I have always regarded as a kind of sacred wormhole into the past. So much has happened on this point of land and its surrounding waters – from the first interactions between native and European peoples, to the first paroxysms of the American Revolution, to the design and building of some of the most beautiful sailing vessels the world has ever known. And now all of you, the graduating class of Roger Williams University, are about to create your own kind of history.”

In advising the graduates, Philbrick chronicled his own personal and professional trajectory, pointing out the twists, turns and surprises in his own story – a stalled career as a sailing journalist; a decade as a stay-at-home dad; a spontaneous move to Nantucket, the island that eventually inspired his writing – and encouraging students to embrace the uncertainty, frustration and fear of the unknown that they will inevitably encounter.

“Surrounded as you are this morning by the waters of a beautiful bay at the end of a rocky, time-steeped peninsula, you are perfectly poised for the next, breathtaking step in the saga of your lives. It is going to be exciting, heartbreaking, rewarding and sometimes overwhelming, with twists and turns that you never saw coming. But it will be the life that you and you alone are destined to live. And remember, the surprises are going to be the best part.”

In his remarks, Farish recalled the unique circumstances surrounding the class’s arrival in the face of Hurricane Irene and commended them for the resilience they displayed in confronting an unexpected, challenging situation. He also cited two stories – Baxter’s success in rising to the Samsung presidency; and an RWU undergraduate surprised this year to find herself every bit the equal of two Princeton University students as they completed an internship together – to illustrate the potential in each and every Roger Williams graduate.

“You aren’t just emotionally and psychologically ready for whatever comes your way,” he told the graduates. “You are intellectually ready as well… You have done things that undergraduates at other universities could only dream of, and you are every bit as well prepared as any graduating class in this country.

“I know that you are ready. The faculty know that you are ready. The question is: Do you know that you are ready? Do you have the necessary confidence in what you’ve learned and experienced during your time here at Roger to look the world in the eye, ask only for the chance to show what you can do, and then exceed expectations?”

Farish’s question was not rhetorical, and the graduates responded with resounding cheers of yes.

Earlier in the ceremony, with apologies for his “horrendous singing voice” – in reality, not particularly horrendous – student speaker Yusuf Richard Afifi ’15 called upon wisdoms imbued by time-tested lyrical passages from the Beatles, which he delivered in song to inspire his fellow Class of 2015 graduates. With a nod to Lennon and McCartney’s “With a Little Help from My Friends,” Afifi awakened memories about the class’s inauspicious arrival on campus.
“Thanks to our good pal Hurricane Irene, our class got a nice jump-start in terms of making new friends,” he said. “We were without power for days and confined to buildings full of strangers, so what did we do? We sat in hallways, exchanged stories, shared interests and cracked jokes. We bonded over things like sports teams and music scenes, building strong friendships, many of which remain today. Together we survived that storm and so much more in the years since.”

A biology and chemistry double major from Yorktown Heights, N.Y., Afifi cited the hard work and perseverance witnessed in his own family – from his father, who immigrated to the U.S. from Egypt; to his mother, who worked tirelessly to support her family; to his late grandmother, who devoted her life to serving her community – as motivation and incentive as he works toward a career in medicine.

“As we cross the threshold into ‘actual’ adulthood, I encourage you to take the knowledge you’ve gained, the experiences you’ve had and the connections you’ve made here at Roger and use them to seize opportunities you never thought possible,” he said. “But more importantly, I challenge you to create your own. Work just as hard and persevere through whatever obstacles come your way, and never forget what you accomplished here.”

Mel A. Topf – Faculty Senate president and a professor of writing studies, rhetoric and composition – delivered remarks on behalf of the University’s faculty, reminding students that if they become real citizens, work for others as well as themselves, then their own potential for growth and success will take care of itself. He also encouraged students to reflect on their collegiate years in the decades to come.

“Recall the professors you liked and the ones you learned a lot from,” Topf said. “And someday consider whether or not they were the same. And come to appreciate those liberal arts courses that now may not seem important to you, but someday will. And finally, recall that we – the faculty of Roger Williams University – wish you now and always, every success and every happiness that you could hope for.”

Also during the ceremony, Topf and Provost Andrew Workman presented the University’s eighth annual Excellence in Teaching Award to Associate Professor of Engineering Charles R. Thomas of the School of Engineering, Computing and Construction Management. And in what has become an annual tradition, 14 students took home President’s Core Values Medallions in recognition of their academic, professional and community-based accomplishments.

The entire graduating Class of 2015 totaled 1,123, with 105 graduate students earning master’s degrees and 128 students graduating from the School of Continuing Studies. Among the 890 undergraduate day students in the class, the five most populous majors included psychology, criminal justice, marketing, architecture and management.

One day earlier – under a sunny sky with a slight bay breeze – 115 students earned juris doctor degrees in an RWU Law ceremony highlighted by an address by the Honorable Roderick L. Ireland – the first African American to serve on the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, who culminated his judicial
career as chief justice and notably voted in favor of same-sex marriage as his state became the first in the nation to legalize it in 2003.

“There is no more noble or rewarding profession than being a lawyer,” Ireland told the assembled graduates, urging them to “temper your future success with humility, and its byproduct, kindness. Treating people with respect, dignity and kindness is often just as important as providing sound legal advice.”