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Student Speaker Michael Johnson Inspires Fellow Graduates at Commencement

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Michael Johnson '11, a graduate of the Accelerated Behavioral Health and Science Program, won this year's student speaker competition to address his fellow graduates at the 2011 Commencement ceremony.

Johnson spoke to more than 4,000 people at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts on May 15, reminding students of the power their achievement has to inspire others to pursue their own education. As a self-described non-traditional student, Johnson finished his degree after more than 20 years working as a counselor.

Read Johnson's full Commencement speech:

Good Morning!

Greetings President Spinelli, Dr. Blank, Honored Guests, Administrators, Faculty, Family, Friends, Alumni and fellow graduates.

My name is Michael Johnson. I'm a non-traditional, 43-year-old graduating student in the Accelerated Behavioral Health and Science Program. It was not an easy decision to come back to school. To say I had anxiety is to put it lightly. Balancing family life, a full-time job and other numerous responsibilities, school seemed like a gigantic undertaking. And as you know, it was.

However, from the moment I started my first class, I became inspired. I was inspired by my family because without their love and constant support, I wouldn't be standing here. I was inspired by my instructors; they opened my mind to new worlds and possibilities. I became inspired by my fellow students; to work with so many different types of people on such a variety of projects greatly expanded my social and personal skills. I've truly made good friends here.

I am inspired by you — Class of 2011! I truly feel that if we could accomplish so much by working together in a classroom imagine what we will do in society as college graduates?

When I look out at the beautiful sea of caps and gowns I don't just see graduates, I see the sacrifices you've made to be here. I know these sacrifices firsthand. I see countless hours of study groups, numerous sleepless nights worrying about exams, missing birthday parties because you have a project due, lost time with friends and family because you've have a chapters to read and papers to write.

Well graduates, you've mastered Blackboard, conquered Power Point, completed the final assignment and won the war of passing your hardest class. Graduates, you've crossed the finish line! Today we recognize what you've sacrificed and applaud your accomplishments!

Now we enter the world as college graduates. Our world is one of a throwaway culture, where who's walking the red carpet is more pressing than our troubled economy, where a celebutant's rehabilitation is more newsworthy than rising unemployment. We are living in an age of companies closing, people losing their homes and children being lost to the streets.

As students, we have proven that we can collaborate to tackle projects and achieve goals. As graduates, we have an obligation to take the skills, education and knowledge we've gained here at Philadelphia University and apply it not only to the empowerment of ourselves, but to the enrichment of our society.

Through innovation and collaboration we can enhance existing jobs and create new ones. We can work to create safer environments, where community centers replace boarded-up buildings, where "Grand Opening" signs are more common than "Going out of Business" signs, where fashion is as green as the money designers are making, where children can play in front of their homes, instead of being afraid to go outside. All it takes is a little inspiration, collaboration and innovation. I propose to accomplish this that we consider "The improvement of life" as the next group project.

During my first semester, my nephew who had graduated high school years earlier, started asking questions about what it was like

coming back to school after so many years, like are you the oldest in the class? Are the exams really hard? After several conversations and encouraging words, he made a choice to go back to school.

In that moment I realized that my educational journey is not mine alone. Our educational journey affects people. Everyone you share your story with is affected by you.

You have an opportunity to inspire people; you have an opportunity to motivate people. Even the ones you don't think are paying attention are affected by your decision to earn your degree. Some of us will use our degrees for promotions, raises and professional advancement. I am challenging you to do more. I am challenging you to be that opportunity for someone.

Be an inspiration to that young person, be a motivator for a friend, talk to a parent or grandparent who feels that education is not attainable for them. We are living proof that it can be done whether you're fresh out of high school or approaching retirement.

Be an example in your community by sharing the limitless benefits of education. We can be that bridge for someone to reach their educational goals. One conversation can motivate, inspire and create change by simply telling your story. As Gandhi so eloquently said, "Be the change you want to see in the world." I challenge you to be that change.

Thank you so much and congratulations' class of 2011! I celebrate you!

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