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Cazenovia College Commencement Keynote Address
May 14, 2022

Shekólih, Greetings to Cazenovia College Board of Trustees, Cazenovia College Faculty, to all of the friends and family here and most of all, greetings to the graduating class of 2022!

Thank you to everyone who has gathered today for this special occasion. On behalf of Oneida Indian Nation Representative Ray Halbritter and the Oneida Indian Nation Council, I bring you a message of peace and gratitude for your acknowledgment that we gather here today on the ancestral homelands of the Oneida people who have called this region home since time immemorial. The Oneida Indian Nation has always been and will always be committed to these lands and this region and the success of all who live, work, and learn here.

I am truly humbled to be given this opportunity to speak about my education here at Caz and my life since graduation in 1986. I would also like to share with you some of the reasons that my arrival here was exceptional and why the experience of being a student here is still so meaningful to me today.

My arrival at the Cazenovia College campus in 1984 was the culmination of many, many years of sacrifice, dedication, and perseverance from my family and my Nation. Members of the Oneida Indian Nation have had a presence here since 1829 when our ancestor, Thomas Cornelius, graduated from the Cazenovia Seminary and became the preacher for our people living on the Windfall reservation. A few years later, two Scanandoa girls would study on this campus in the mid-1800s, and Margaret Elm graduated from the Cazenovia Missionary School around 1920. She was poised to go to South America for her missionary work when she met and married her husband, John Wheelock. One of her daughters, Beatrice, was the mother of one of our current Turtle Clan Representatives, Clint Hill.

Nation Members have been welcomed here and played an important role on this campus for many years, but I didn't know this history when I attended in 1984. I wasn't sure that I belonged here, even as I was so excited to attend. Instead, my family and the Oneida people knew a very different history of education, and the fact that I attended college – and that my sister did as well – is a miracle. Our mother, Doreen, was sent to an Indian Boarding School when she was a young girl of 9 years old. She, her younger sister and brother attended the Thomas Indian School in Western New York for six years, from 1951 until 1957 when it closed.

Many of you may not be aware of the American Boarding School Era, which began in the 1880s. Fewer of you may know that these schools continued operating until the 1960s. Their motto was – “Kill the Indian, Save the Man” - many Indian children were forcibly removed from their homes on reservations and sent to various boarding schools across the country.

They were separated not just from parents and extended family, but from their language, traditions, and community. Each day, they were clearly told they did not belong and could not do so while remaining themselves. It is hard to say whether the denial of identity or the day-to-day mistreatment was more cruel.

The time my mother spent there shaped her future, my future, and my children's future. She was reluctant to involve herself in our education and I do not recall her ever attending a parent-teacher

conference in my entire 13 years of schooling prior to college. She simply did not feel comfortable stepping into that huge, red brick building – it brought up too many hurtful memories for her, and we did not push her to do so. In her mind, school was not a place she belonged.

Despite this difficult history, my desire to attend college was always strong. I loved school, I loved learning, and most of all, I loved mathematics. I was one of those kids for whom math came easy and I thoroughly enjoyed doing my homework and studying. I was fortunate to have had an older, wiser sister who laid the framework for my continuing education by attending college herself and introducing a new way to see education that was supportive rather than stifling, inspiring rather than diminishing. She graduated from Caz in 1983 and showed me that this was a place I could belong too.

My sister helped with the forms and applications needed to apply at Caz, and our Aunt Gloria Halbritter, provided the names and addresses of several companies that had developed scholarships for Indian students to attend college. Just as importantly, she instilled the desire to learn and succeed in all of her nieces and nephews and was always eager to support us in any way that she could. There was no internet or Google search engine in 1984, but that stapled three-page list of addresses she gave us was invaluable in our college application process. Some of those awards were for small amounts, but they helped me buy essential supplies – and let my roommate and me order pizza when needed. My Aunt Gloria believed that I belonged here, at college, and her support helped me believe too.

There are no doubt many people who worked hard to ensure you could belong here, whether that's a parent, sibling or other family member, high school teachers and counselors, or other mentors in your life. One day, your success here and in your lives after college may enable you to fill this role for someone else. I hope you will jump at this chance and do all you can to support their journey.

I came to Caz with a passion for math, and I loved my mathematics classes so much that I pleaded to take more! Yet I learned so many other things inside and outside of the classroom, and I think those of you graduating today will agree when I say these lessons were just as important as my studies, if not more so in some ways.

My roommate and I became fast friends. She would come home with me on weekends and spend time with my family as if we were her own. Donna had never experienced life on an Indian reservation before, and it was a very different way of living than she was used to. In those days, we had no running water at home and few resources. I expected that first visit would be her last.

That wasn't the case. Our friendship continued to grow as we learned more about each other, all the things that made us different and, at the same time, the many important things we shared in common. A semester later, I had the chance to learn this again when a new roommate, Nancy, arrived. I had so little in common with her – she came from a background of privilege. Yet within minutes we discovered that we too shared more than we might have imagined, and we became friends immediately. I saw that what I had felt here on campus was true, that I was surrounded by good people who came here because of the diverse and welcoming environment that made it all possible.

As your time at Cazenovia comes to a close today, I suspect the friends who helped you belong are close to your heart. Finding them was among the most important things you could have done during your college education – and you were essential to helping them belong as well, even if you didn't notice at the time.

While math was my first passion, psychology soon became another. I was fascinated by learning about the human mind. What makes us who we are? Why do we see the world the way we do? I remember one professor in particular had a profound impact on my understanding of the relationships between people that could sometimes be so difficult to comprehend. He stood out among the faculty, played in a punk band on the weekends, and always wrote on the board in big, blocky letters. His class gave me so much clarity on the larger motivators behind human behavior and helped evolve my perspective on those around me.

For the first time, I understood that everyone was looking for their place to belong. That when my fellow students arrived on campus for the first time, many of them felt as uncertain as I did.

As you enter the workforce or pursue more education, keep this in mind. Your new coworkers or cohort are also finding their way, and when you embrace this community, you are building a place to belong together. That is one of the most valuable things you can take from your studies here into the world.

After graduation, I decided to pursue an additional degree in psychology. Was that the last time my interests evolved? Absolutely not! My plans changed again, and I returned home to work for the Oneida Indian Nation as a floor supervisor at its bingo hall. That bingo hall was the foundation of the Nation's enterprises, and as they grew, so did my career. I would move to the finance department and become a senior bookkeeper for many years. Education called to me again, and I considered a degree in accounting. Yet what really appealed to me was my first love: mathematics. I earned a Bachelor's degree in mathematics at Utica College of Syracuse University, then continued my studies at Colgate University, where I earned a Master's degree in teaching high school math.

After receiving my degree, I was hired as the Education Director for the Oneida Indian Nation, overseeing our Library and Early Learning Center and the language, youth development, and scholarship program. I also served as the Director of Education and Cultural Outreach while managing the Shako:wi Cultural Center for 15 years.

During this time, I realized something incredible had happened. The daughter of a survivor of Indian Boarding Schools had become a first-generation college student with multiple degrees. I was now an educator myself, serving the Oneida Indian Nation and preserving all that these schools had tried to strip from Native Americans. Today, I am the Nation's Documentarian. I research the Nation's history and compile it in a way that is useful Nation Members. I couldn't have imagined it when I was applying to colleges in 1984, but this is where I belong now, and I am so glad to be here.

I am joining you for what I know from experience is a bittersweet moment. You are about to leave behind a wonderful, supportive community where you have learned so much and made so many great friends. I know exactly how you feel, because I felt that way too at my own graduation. The years I spent studying at Cazenovia were some of the best times of my life. I made good friends while I was here, some who I keep in touch with today. The shenanigans we got ourselves into, playing on the wooden castle playground at the elementary school or having deep conversations about the Grateful Dead and how we were all going to follow them after graduation...it seems like a lifetime ago.

It seems even longer than a lifetime when I remember that young girl who was so eager to go to college and her mother who was so frightened by the things she had experienced under the guise of education. She could hardly believe this could be the right place for her daughter.

Of all the things I learned during my time here at Cazenovia, the most important was that I belonged on this campus in 1984. I belonged at every educational institution I would attend in the coming years, in each job I held throughout my career, and in every space where I could contribute and learn.

That is the lesson that I hope all of you will take with you after graduating today. Your interests are sure to change, but some will remain with you for life. You may find a rewarding career in your field of study, or pursue countless other paths. Some of the friends graduating with you may attend your wedding, celebrate the birth of your children, and stand beside you through all of life's joyful and challenging times. Some may drift away, but will always occupy a special place in your heart because of what you shared here.

The one thing that will never change is that regardless of your race, gender or economic status, who you love or where you call home, you belong here. You belonged here the moment you chose to attend this college and you belong here today because of your hard work, your talents, and the connections you have forged. Wherever you take your skills, whatever life you create for yourself, you will belong there too. Your accomplishments will stand for themselves beginning with everything that has brought you here today.

Thank you, and congratulations to the class of 2022! I cannot wait for you to discover all of the places you are meant to be and all of the things that you will achieve when you find them.