College of Our Lady of the Elms
Eighty-Fourth Commencement - 2015

Commencement Address
U.S. Rep. John Lewis

Madame President, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Mr. Mayor, President of the Sisters of St. Joseph, my friend and my beloved brother Richie Neal, parents, friends, faculty members and to the Class of 2015: Congratulations.

I must tell you that I'm delighted, very happy and very pleased to be here. I must tell you it is almost too much to stand here. It is almost unreal, unbelievable, 50 years later, to come to this ceremony and to know the history of this college, Our Lady of the Elms College, and to be blessed with the presence of some of the Sisters of St. Joseph. If it hadn't been for those sisters, those wonderful sisters, I wouldn't be standing here. Thank you.

I want to congratulate each one of you. For never giving up. For never giving in. For keeping the faith. And for keeping your eyes on the prize. I said to some of you much earlier that you look good. You look beautiful, handsome and colorful. Richard Neal, my good friend, your congressperson, is a wonderful man. We sit together in the Congress Ways and Means Committee. He's on my left, and we meet often. He's been to Alabama with me more than once, and I've been to his district. And I'm glad to be here today.

Now, most of you know I didn't grow up in a big city like Springfield; I didn't grow up in a big city like Boston. I grew up in rural Alabama, 50 miles from Montgomery. I'm from a little place called Troy. My father was a sharecropper, a tenant farmer. Back in 1944, when I was only 4 years old -- and I do remember when I was 4 (How many of you graduates remember when you were 4? What happens to the rest of us?) -- my father had saved $300, and with the $300, a man sold him 110 acres of land. We still own this land today, in rural Alabama.

On this farm, we raised a lot of cotton, corn, peanuts, hogs, cows and chickens. I don't eat too many peanuts today because I ate so many peanuts when I was growing up,

and I just don't want to eat any more peanuts. Sometimes I get on a flight from Washington to Atlanta, Atlanta to Washington, and the flight attendants try to offer me some peanuts, and I say, "No thank you, I don't care for any peanuts." But also on this farm, we raised a lot of chickens, and it was my responsibility to raise the chickens, to care for the chickens. And I fell in love with raising the chickens, like no one else could raise chickens. I know as graduates, some of you like to eat chicken. But you don't know anything about raising chickens, do you.

But as a little boy, it was my responsibility to care for the chickens, to raise those chickens. When the setting hen is set, you take the fresh eggs and mark them with a pencil, place them under the setting hen and wait for three long weeks for the little chicks to hatch. I know some of you smart graduates and some of your professors are saying, "John Lewis, why do you mark those fresh eggs with a pencil before you place them under the setting hen?" Well, from time to time, another hen could get on the same nest, and they'll produce some more fresh eggs. And you have to tell the fresh eggs from the eggs that were already under the setting hen. Do you follow me? You don't follow me. It's okay.

So when these little chicks would hatch, I would fool these setting hens -- I would cheat on these setting hens. I would take these little chicks and give them to another hen. I'd put them in a box with a lantern, raise them on their own. Get some more fresh eggs, mark them with a pencil, place them under the setting hen -- and encourage the setting hen to stay on the nest for another three weeks. Kept fooling the setting hens. It's not the right thing to do; it's not the moral thing to do, not the most loving thing to do, not the most nonviolent thing to do. But I was never quite able to save $18.98 to order the most inexpensive incubator or hatcher from the Sears & Roebuck store. Now as graduates, you're too young to know about it, or to remember -- there was something called a Sears & Roebuck Catalog. It was a big book, a heavy book. Some people called it their ordering book; other people called it a wish book: "I wish I had this, I wish I had that." So I just kept on wishing.

But as a little child, about 9 years old, I wanted to be a minister. I wanted to preach the Gospel. So from time to time, with the help of my brothers and sisters and my fresh cousins, we would gather all of our chickens together in the chicken yard, like you are gathered here in this hall. And we would have church. The chickens, along with my brothers and sisters and cousins, would make up the audience, the congregation. And I would start speaking, or preaching, and when I looked back some of the chickens would bow their heads, some of the chickens would shake their heads. They never quite said "amen." But, Richard [Neal], I'm convinced that some of the

chickens that I preached to in the ’40s and the ’50s tended to listen to me much better than some of our colleagues listen to us today in the Congress. As a matter of fact, some of those chickens were just more productive: At least they produced eggs. But that’s enough of that.

When I would visit the little town of Troy, visit Montgomery, visit Tuskegee -- I saw those little signs that said, “White Men,” “Colored Men,” “White Women,” “Colored Women,” “White Waiting,” “Colored Waiting.” I would come home and ask my mother and my father, my grandparents and my great-grandparents, “Why?” It was: “That’s the way it is. Don’t get in the way. Don’t get in trouble.”

In 1955, 15 years old, in the 10th grade, I read about Rosa Parks, heard the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on the radio. The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the actions of Rosa Parks inspired me to find a way to get in the way, inspired me to get in trouble. What I call good trouble. Necessary trouble. So I come to say to you, as you leave this wonderful college, that you must be bold, brave and courageous, and find a way to get in the way.

You must get out there and do your best to leave this country, to leave this planet -- this little piece of real estate we call Earth -- a little greener, a little cleaner and a little more peaceful for generations yet unborn. That is your calling; that is your mission; that is your mandate.

When I was young -- inspired by Dr. King, inspired by Rosa Parks -- I went down to the public library in 1956 at the age of 16, with my brothers and sisters and cousins, trying to get a library card. Trying to check out some books. And we were told by the librarian that the libraries were whites only, not for coloreds. I never went back to the library in Troy, Alabama, until July 5, 1998, for a book signing of my first book, Walking with the Wind. And hundreds of blacks and white citizens showed up. End of the program, they gave me a library card. It says something about the distance we’ve come and the progress we’ve made in laying down the burden of race.

We’ve come a distance; we’ve made a lot of progress, but we’re not there yet. For those who say nothing has changed, I feel like saying, “Come and walk in my shoes. The signs that I saw are gone, and they will not return -- the only place you will see those signs, and your children will see those signs, will be in a book. In a museum. On a video.”

You were born in a different country. You’ve grown up in a different country. In a better place. So you have a moral obligation, a mission, a mandate to get out there, and push and pull and help

redeem the soul of America. And if we can get it right here in America, maybe we can serve as a model for the rest of the world. Just think: A few short years ago, black people and white people couldn't board a Greyhound bus together in Washington, D.C., and be seated together. In 1961, the same year that President Barack Obama was born. And that's why we organized the Freedom Rides. We were beaten; we were left bloody and unconscious. Black and white students, religious leaders -- we didn't become bitter. We didn't hate. We kept the faith.

As a matter of fact, one of the guys that beat me and my white seatmate on May 9, 1961, in a little town called Rock Hill, South Carolina -- about 30 miles from Charlotte, North Carolina -- came to my office in Washington in the '70s with his son, in his 40s, in February 2009, and said, "Mr. Lewis, I'm one of the people that beat you. I'm one of the people that beat your seatmate. Member of the Klan." He said, "I want to apologize. Will you forgive me?" I said, "I accept your apology. I forgive you." His son started crying; he started crying. They hugged me, and I hugged them back, and I started crying. It is the power of the way of peace, the power of the way of love, the power of faith, race and nonviolence.

The movement was saying, in effect, "We must all learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or as Dr. King put it, we will perish as fools." We all live in the same house -- not just an American house, but the world house. As the late A. Philip Randolph said during the March on Washington in 1963, maybe our forefathers and our foremothers all came here on a different ship, but today we're all in the same boat. And we must look out for each other. Care for each other. We must never, ever leave anyone out or leave anyone behind. My message to you is to do what you can to save our little planet, to save our world. Humanize our country; help humanize the world. We can do it, and we must do it.

I want to just make another point or two. When I was growing up outside of Troy, Alabama, 50 miles from Montgomery, I had an aunt by the name of Sineva, and my Aunt Sineva lived in what we called a shotgun house. She didn't have a green manicured lawn; she had a simple, plain dirt yard. And sometimes at night you could look up through the holes in the ceiling, through the tin roof, and count the stars. When it would rain, she'd get a pail or bucket or tub and catch the rainwater. I know most of you here in this great state, in this part of America, have never seen a shotgun house. You don't even know what I'm talking about. Shotgun house, old house: one way in, one way out. In a nonviolent sense, you could bounce a basketball through the front door and it would go straight out the back.

One Saturday afternoon, a group of my brothers and sisters and cousins were out playing in

my Aunt Sineva's dirt yard, and an unbelievable storm came up. The wind started blowing, the thunder started rolling, the lightning started flashing, and the rain started beating on the tin roof of this little shotgun house. She became terrified and started crying, and all of us little children started crying. When one corner of this little house appeared to be lifting from its foundation, she had us walk to that corner to try and hold the house down with our little bodies. When another corner appeared to be lifting, she had us walk to that side. We were little children walking with the wind -- but we never left the house.

I come here also to say thanks to the Sisters of St. Joseph for not leaving the house. You must not leave the house, Elms College. You must not leave the house where there's suffering, where there's hate, where there's violence. You must stay and try to hold the house together. We all live in the same house. We're one family; we're one people. I come here because on that bridge -- March 7, 1965 -- I was wearing only a backpack and a trenchcoat. In that backpack, I had two books; I wanted something to read in jail. I had one apple and one orange; I wanted to have something to eat. Toothpaste and toothbrush; I wanted to be able to brush my teeth. I was hit in the head by a state trooper with a nightstick. Had a concussion. Thought I saw death. I thought I was going to die. I didn't know how I made it back to the little church, but someone apparently had carried me back. And from the church they took me to the Good Samaritan Hospital in downtown Selma, where the Sisters of St. Joseph took care of 17 of us. [Turning to the president of the SSJs] So, Sister, thank you. [They hug.]

We are not there yet. We are on our way -- there cannot be any turning back. Left bloody, the Freedom Rides, arrested and jailed 40 times during the '60s, and since I've been in Congress, far more time. Speaking up for comprehensive immigration reform, what was going on in South Africa, in the Sudan. It's a shame and a disgrace, all of us must see, to have more than 11 million people in our country living in the shadows. We need comprehensive immigration reform. You must get out there and push -- we all must learn to live together. It doesn't matter whether we are black or white, Latino or Asian American, or Native American -- we are one people. We all live in the same house.

The world out there -- the big world -- America, is depending on you. To go out there -- you're so smart. We didn't have a website; we hadn't heard of the Internet. Facebook? What is that? Cellular telephone -- what is that? Use social media. Use grace and love and faith to organize the unorganized. And you can help build a beloved community that respects the dignity and the worth of every child of God. Thank you, and good luck.