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FIRST LADY CHIRLANE MCCRAY GIVES REMARKS AT THE YEAR UP GRADUATION CEREMONY

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

Alicia, thank you so much for that warm introduction. And thank you to everyone at Year Up for this wonderful award. It is truly an honor to be recognized by an organization I admire so much.

And I'm not the only member of Team de Blasio who is praising Year Up. The success of this program—your success—is influencing policymakers throughout City government.

In fact, back in November, our Mayor announced a major shift in the way the City helps New Yorkers prepare to land good jobs. A major part of the plan is work-based learning for young people.

And the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City, which I lead as Chair, has also been studying the Year Up model. Yes, we do talk about you all. When we consider what works best in the kind of programs we want to support, Year Up is always part of the conversation.

So, my point is this: All of you are pioneers, in the movement to prepare young New Yorkers for the jobs of tomorrow.

To steal a phrase from the oath the graduates will recite later—all of you are lifting up others while climbing toward your dreams.

I know that the climb has not always been easy. Each and every graduate has overcome big obstacles on the journey here. And I can relate. My own journey to this day, to be able to stand here at this podium was not smooth.

I was born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1954. My mother's parents were immigrants from Barbados. My father's family came from the south. And he was a veteran of World War II.

My mother pretty much grew up without a mother, and my father grew up without a father. So they didn't have a lot of reference points when it came to being parents. But they did their best. And even though neither one of them went to college, they understood the value of education.

My parents made great sacrifices to make sure my siblings and I attended high-quality public schools. And their sacrifices paid off. I got a good education. But it wasn't easy.

If I had to sum up my school experience in one word, it would be "only." I was always the only black student in my class. And there was a stretch when I was the only black student in the entire school.

Unfortunately, my peers never let me forget that I was different. They bullied me. They chased me around the playground. And when they grew tired of tormenting me, they pretended I didn't exist.

So, I was lonely. I was angry. I was downright miserable.

But whenever I felt like I just couldn't handle my emotions anymore, someone was there for me.

Sometimes it was my parents. But there were also people like Marge at the Girls Club or Brian at the YMCA who saw an emerging leader in me, where most people—myself included—saw a quiet, uncertain, little girl.

There were people like Frank Hatchett at the Dunbar Community Center, who taught me to channel my joys and frustrations into dance.

And people like my high school guidance counselor, who encouraged me to apply to Wellesley College, where the trajectory of my life was altered forever.

All of you, have people like that in your lives. In fact, many of them are in this room today: your parents and guardians... your mentors... your supervisor... and the staff of Year Up New York. They're here today, because they care deeply about you.

Which brings me to my first piece of advice: Don't be afraid to ask your supporters for help. Nobody gets up the mountain alone. And it's teamwork that makes the climb worthwhile.

My second piece of advice is to make the most of this moment in your life. It's a special moment, and you don't want to waste it.

I'm reminded of a Maya Angelou quote that I've always loved: "The future is plump with promise."

Well, right now, your future is not just plump—it is practically bursting with opportunities.

But you need to pluck them up now, while they're still ripe. Now is the time to get your college degree. And now is the time to start a fulfilling career.

So if you have a job lined up, give it your very best, each and every day.

If you do not have a job yet, don't get discouraged. You now have the resume and the skills to land a great one.

And don't let the college credits you have earned at Year Up go to waste. Enroll in more classes as soon as you can—and get that degree.

It's the best investment you'll ever make. I know, you've probably heard that a thousand times, but that doesn't make it any less true. College is where I learned how to learn—and that's a skill I use each and every day.

That's all the advice I have for you today. I know everyone is eager—as you should be—to get to the main event—honoring the graduates.

As I look out at all the beautiful faces in this audience, I feel better than ever about the next generation of New Yorkers.

The future of our city is in good hands. And don't let anybody tell you differently.

Good luck, Godspeed, and congratulations!

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