



ONE HUNDRED  
AND FORTY-FOURTH  
COMMENCEMENT

MAY 16, 2015

2015



COMMENCEMENT

UNIVERSITY  
OF ILLINOIS  
AT URBANA-  
CHAMPAIGN

## Commencement Speaker Honorary Degree Citation

RISA JUANITA LAVIZZO-MOUREY

President and CEO, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Honorary Degree of Doctor of Science



Risa Juanita Lavizzo-Mourey, physician, scholar, and administrator. You are a leader in higher education, government, and philanthropy. Through your work and advocacy, you have had a profound impact on the health and wellness of all Americans.

You are a respected physician-scholar who has served on numerous federal advisory committees and panels, including the President’s Advisory Commission on Consumer Protection and Quality in the Health Care Industry, and the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports and Nutrition. In each role, you have worked to eliminate disparities in healthcare access and to promote healthy lifestyles.

You have led the nation toward improved health equity and toward a broader model of prevention that engages sectors outside of healthcare, including agriculture, business, and education.

In 2003 you became the president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and focused its resources on fighting childhood obesity. Other organizations joined your effort to reverse this epidemic by broadening access to affordable, healthy foods and safe places to be physically active, especially in low-income neighborhoods. You counselled First Lady Michelle Obama on creating the “Let’s Move!” initiative. Under your leadership, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has played a major role in decelerating the growing rates of obesity among children.

In appreciation of your efforts to create broad coalitions to improve health and wellness, and your dedication to using philanthropy for the greatest good for every American, and upon the recommendation of the Senate of the Urbana-Champaign campus, it is a great honor to present you to the President of the University for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.

Presented by: *Tanya M. Gallagher, Dean of the College of Applied Health Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**  
**Formal Introduction of Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey**  
**Saturday, May 18, 2015**  
**Chancellor Phyllis M. Wise**

It is my great privilege to introduce our 2015 Commencement Speaker, Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey.

Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey, the president and CEO of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, may be the single most powerful voice and advocate in the country today when it comes to effecting change on a national scale to build a culture of health for all. In this role, she leads the country's largest philanthropic organization dedicated to improving the health and healthcare of all of us.

The child of two physicians, a career in medicine was a very early decision for her. Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey did her undergraduate work at the University of Washington and the State University of New York at Stony Brook and earned her medical degree from Harvard Medical School.

As chief of geriatric medicine at the University of Pennsylvania College of Medicine, Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey was widely known for still making house calls. It wasn't a practice she carried on just because it was appreciated her patients. Rather it was a practice that she realized was critical in caring for those patients. Dr. Lavizzo-Mourey saw that to really treat the medical conditions of those in her care she needed to understand where and how those conditions came to be.

And once you start to understand this – you can start to see where our most effective treatments and cures may not be found in pills or injections, but in our ability to make health and healthcare the primary drivers of how we design our communities and how we organize our social and regulatory priorities.

What began with her position as practicing physician treating individuals has expanded into a 30 year career as a policy-maker, university professor and non-profit executive. And all of these roles have come with the singular focus on changing our collective understanding of health. She wants our nation to stop thinking about health as simply not being sick, and start seeing that health is about where we live, learn, work and play.

And since taking leadership of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in 2003, she has brought a sustained and comprehensive focus on making that vision a reality and shown all of us how philanthropy can and should achieve lasting social change.

She is a member of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the President's Council for Fitness, Sports and Nutrition. She has been an advisor to presidents. She ranks among Forbes list of the 100 Most Powerful Women in the World.

And as you all saw just a few minutes ago, we are now proud to name her one of the newest honorary members of the Illinois family.

Please welcome your 2015 Commencement Speaker, Dr. Risa Lavizzo-Mourey.

**University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign**  
**Saturday, May 16, 2015**  
**Dr. Risa Lavizzo Mourey**

Thank you Chancellor Wise...President Easter, and Chairman McMillan. It's a real honor to be here today. And it's a true privilege to be included in the distinguished group of scholars receiving honorary degrees from the great University of Illinois.

Good morning class of 2015 and congratulations!

This is big day for you. So, it's a good thing that you got to bed really early last night! Right? And it's an even better thing that you rose with the sunshine this morning - all bright-eyed, and full of pep, to make breakfast for the special people who helped you get this far.

Oh. Well, OK. How about we do something special for them now?

Your moms and dads... Your sisters and brothers...

Your grandparents. Husbands. Wives. Partners. Friends...

And your professors. They've all walked this road with you.

Pushing you. Praising you. Putting you back on track when you began to falter. Sending you comfort food and cash...

And, most of all, staying by your side, loving you no matter what.

Believe me, they are just as happy as you are that this day has come...

This is their celebration, too.

So, stand up - yes, stand up, turn around, and salute them with a grateful round of applause.

Graduates, I want to start my remarks today by thanking each and every one of you for entering the field of health.

You may not think that what you've spent these past years studying has anything to do with health. But it does. And I'm going to tell you why. Health isn't only about curing illness, or choosing the right food and exercise. It's about everything. It's the bedrock of your personal fulfillment. It's the backbone of our nation's economic prosperity.

It's an essential part of everything we do. And right now the state of our nation's health isn't exactly a badge of pride.

- Heart disease, cancer, stroke, and other very avoidable chronic diseases account for more than 50 percent of deaths in America each year.
- We spend close to 3 trillion dollars a year on health care, and yet we continue to lose more than 226 billion dollars in productivity because of personal and family health issues.
- One-third of our nation's children are overweight or obese, And unless we do something about it, they have a real chance of becoming the first generation to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation.
- And a shocking 70 percent of America's young adults are too fat, too poorly educated, or too tangled up

in the criminal system to serve in the military.

Our nation's health is a reflection of the state of our neighborhoods, towns, and cities... It's a reflection of how we raise and educate our children...the messages we promote in mass media...and the priorities we set as a society. Most of all, health is a reflection of how all of these things are knit together...Or more precisely – how they should be knit together to better our well-being.

Let me tell you about the first time I recognized these links.

It happened when I was just about your age training as a physician at a hospital in the West Roxbury section of Boston.

That is where I met a patient that I will forever remember as "Patient Ruth." She appeared at the admitting station late on a cold winter night, homeless and helpless. Her feet were swollen. She wore a pair of flimsy house shoes. Raw leg ulcers made walking painful.

Her medical chart was thick. She'd been to the hospital many times before. We did what we always did- gave her a few hours in a warm bed, some antibiotics, a decent meal. But the next morning she had to go because according to the "rules" our job of delivering health care was done. So she limped out the door, straight back into the dark tunnel of other health problems she faced every day:

No home. No job. Lousy food, and no family or support system to turn to for help.

Our definition of health ended at the front door of the hospital. But Ruth's health was the result of everything outside those doors.

Poverty. Inadequate housing. Unsafe streets. Broken social networks. The lack of psychological and emotional resilience.

That was the moment the light bulb in my head flipped on, and I saw how all these things are intrinsically connected.

And believe me, once that light bulb clicks, it changes the way you see everything. The connections everywhere you look.

That's why I say you have entered the health field. Because whatever you decide to do with the incredible education you have received here, you have the opportunity to improve the connections in a way that will not only benefit your own health, but also the health and well-being of the people you love, this country, and the wider world.

We're counting on you to do it because you're the most connected generation in history. I mean, how many of you are tweeting or instagramming at this very minute?

You're the generation of Uber and Kickstarter. You're the generation of Fitbits, and Jawbones, and the Applewatch. You've helped redefine the way we listen to music, the way we spread ideas, and the way we drive social movements. Your dreams and discoveries that are altering the course of history.

Now, it's your turn to take the lead. And I'm so glad it is.

Because, quite frankly, we need you. America is at a pivotal moment of change regarding the health of its residents: This is a moment of great urgency and unprecedented opportunity. We need your vision. We need your leadership. And we need your impatience with the status quo. We want you not just to join the conversation, but change it. Not just to address the serious health issues we face, but eradicate them. We need you to push...and instigate...and revolutionize.

Not too long ago, I heard a college professor named Jose Gomez Marquez talk about innovation. He told a story about how he showed a picture of a blind person to a group of students and asked them:

Can this person drive a car? And, of course, the students began to debate whether it was possible or not. Then, he showed the same picture to a different group of students and asked: How can this person drive a car? And - you guessed it – they instantly started coming up with ways to make it work. So, I'm not going to ask you if it's possible to make health and well-being an essential part of everything you do from today on. I'm asking you to think about how you're going to do it.

My generation has taught you what we know. Now, it's your turn to take that knowledge and hack it. Turn it upside down. Turn it inside out. Reshuffle it. And repurpose it to build a Culture of Health in new and innovative ways. It's your turn to create a society that gives every person, the opportunity to live the healthiest life they can.

No matter who they are. No matter where they live.

No matter what their physical, or economic, challenges may be.

It's your turn to ensure that the well-being of our nation's children

is a matter of fact and not a matter of chance. To invent better ways to clean and preserve our air, and land, and water... To design and build safer, more affordable, more sustainable communities that promote health from cradle to twilight...

Don't get me wrong, every individual will make the choices that will determine much of his or her individual health. But let's be clear.

The choices an individual makes, depends on the choices she has.

It's your turn to become the employers, the policymakers, the educators, and the artists who will provide society with the desire, and the means, to make the healthy choice the easy choice for everyone. So, hey, no pressure... but the future health of our nation depends on you. No matter what industry you enter... We're counting on you to become leaders who know that good health boosts the bottom line, and visa-versa...

Leaders who do your part to keep America vital and productive, so every one of us has an equal opportunity to pursue a fulfilling, productive life.

It's a big challenge.

But you are graduates of U of I, which means you can do anything!

Just over 100 years ago, Woodrow Wilson gave a commencement speech in which he told the graduates:

*“Do not forget why you are here. You are not here merely to prepare to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement.*

*You are here to enrich the world. And you impoverish yourself if you forget that errand.”*

So yes, we’re expecting a lot from you. But class of 2015, you can start on all of that on Monday. Today and tonight you should just enjoy yourselves. Take a selfie with Alma Mater.

Toast your friends, and family. Let them say ridiculously nice things about you.

And get at least one of them to pay for some Super-Stuffed pizzas at Papa Dels! Celebrate. And then, go out and put your passion to work!

As my final wish for you, I’d like to share one of Alice Walker’s poems. It’s called “The Nature of This Flower is To Bloom”

This is what it says:

*Rebellious. Living Against the Elemental Crush.*

*A Song of Color Blooming For Deserving Eyes.*

*Blooming Gloriously For its Self.*

Graduates of 2015 – Live against the elemental crush.

Become a song of color. Bloom for deserving eyes.

Bloom gloriously for yourself.

And may God speed you on your way.

Thank you, best of luck, and congratulations!