

# Hope Reigns

By *Shaneesa N. Ashford*

**M**ore than 500 men joined the ranks of the Class of 2006 during Morehouse College's spring and summer Commencement exercises. But the graduates who marched in the spring commencement had more than family, friends and the College on their sides – they also had the Weather Channel.

Never have more people prayed for sun. This year marked the first that Morehouse College divulged a “weather plan” for Spring commencement – an alternative plan in case of inclement weather. While practical, it was not the wish of the students, who embraced the tradition of Commencement on Century Campus.

Enter the Weather Channel, with up-to-the-minute weather reports to Morehouse through the Office of Communications. For days, the campus community awaited reports of whether the weather would hold up. If so, the graduates would join the thousands of Morehouse Men who have crossed the stage under the watchful eye of the statue of Benjamin E. Mays, the College's sixth president. If not, proceedings would move to Forbes Arena, with Archer Hall as the overflow area.

As it drizzled on Century Campus during the 122nd Commencement, the graduates happily donned plastic ponchos and smiling faces. But those ponchos disappeared as it came time to cross the stage into a new future. A little rain was not about to keep these Morehouse Men down.

## Threshold of Promise

As family and friends gathered to celebrate during Commencement and Reunion Weekend, the 2006 baccalaureate service set the tone. The Rev. Matthew Vaughn Johnson Sr., a 1983 graduate of Morehouse, recalled stories of his time at the College,

and the respect the institution garnered.

Johnson focused his sermon on the troubles of a biblical people who had been granted a birthright to land, but had to struggle to settle it. He advised the students that while they have achieved a milestone, they would need to be prepared for what lies ahead.

“We're on the threshold of promise, but we haven't settled the land,” Johnson said. “Settling the land may be a whole lot harder than getting to it.”

Indeed, many believe black men are not allowed or are not pursuing opportunities to live up to their potential. According to a March 20, 2006, *New York Times* article titled “Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn,” statistics show that black men face critical situations regarding employment and education.

Johnson noted that even with a leg up through education, there still may be tough times ahead. He said the class of 2006 must set themselves apart and take ownership of who they are.

“Don't let anyone convince you that you are no more than average,” Johnson said. “Those are not the kind of men Morehouse makes.”

## Inspiration from a Morehouse Mom

The 2006 Commencement speaker was aware that Morehouse has a reputation for countering negative statistics on the future of black men. Indeed, it was eight years ago when Dr. Ruth Simmons, the 18th president of Brown University, watched as her son, Khari Simmons, graduated from Morehouse with a degree in music. This year, her nephew, Jeremy Brown, graduated with a degree in business administration.

And so, on Mothers' Day, “Morehouse Mom” Simmons noted the importance of the release of so many educated black men into





the world. To the mothers and grandmothers of these graduates, she said, it is the gift of a lifetime, and it must be celebrated.

"This is a serious moment," Simmons said. "And to the extent that there are young boys in this audience watching, they need to see clearly what we value as a people – not style, but substance. Not show, but achievement. Not frivolity, but sacrifice. Not imitation, but respect for our cultural legacy."

Echoing Johnson's message, Simmons spoke on the importance of remaining true to yourself and your cause. In a recent survey on the issues facing African American men, conducted by *The Washington Post*, Harvard University and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, more than 60 percent of black male respondents noted that they are considered to be less intelligent and have been treated with less respect than others. She admonished the graduates not to allow anyone to take away their dignity or freedom to be who they are.

"You are equal to any, but it's important that your deeds demonstrate that," Simmons said. "You have been blessed with an education, and it is your duty to make that possible for others.

"Never let anyone take from you what is your inalienable right to dignity and your freedom to be who you are," Simmons said. "No success is worth that."

She also noted that in order to succeed at Morehouse, one must be motivated. That motivation will sustain these graduates as they overcome myriad obstacles, said Simmons.

"You do know that an education from Morehouse will give you the edge to overcome those challenges," she said. "You were motivated to achieve, and so you have, and so you will for a lifetime to come.

"Morehouse Men are built to last."

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—Ruth J. Simmons, president of Brown University, Commencement Speaker

Morehouse, however, counters these statistics with a group of men who are poised to take on the world, including:

Alan Clarke, the 2006 valedictorian, who maintained a perfect 4.0 grade point average and deferred Harvard Law School for a year to participate in the Asia Pacific Leadership Program;

Chaz Clark, the first recipient of the UNCF Liberty Scholarship after 9/11, who will begin his career in the Internal Audit Division of Price Waterhouse Cooper;

Donald Washington, who went from being homeless to graduating with honors, and is the recipient of the Compton Mentor Fellowship;

Chris Campbell, an honors graduate who began his own non-profit foundation, the Cardinal Mentoring Program; and Cameron Dayne, a student-athlete who won the 2006 Franklin L. Forbes Most Outstanding Athlete Award, and garnered seven selections as an NCAA Division II All-American in track and field, all while graduating with honors and being inducted into Phi Beta Kappa.

"We are the next generation of Morehouse Men that has boldly climbed the mountaintop of educational excellence that so few black men are able to ascend," said Clarke in his valedictory address.

But these successes, said Clarke, did not come without struggle. And there are struggles to come. "Tomorrow, the mountain grows higher. Tomorrow, the path grows more treacherous."

To navigate that path, he said, his classmates must continue to believe in themselves and in what Morehouse has instilled.

"We must continue to believe—to believe in ourselves, to believe in the education that Morehouse has afforded us, to believe that we can extend a helping hand to our brothers and sisters across the world who may stumble or even fall," Clarke said. "I challenge each of us ... to believe unconditionally, not only in one's success, but to believe in the success of the class of 2006." ■

## 'Continue to Believe'

The Class of 2006 of Morehouse, 545 strong, is far from average. Rather, it is a group of men who can boast that nearly 50 percent of them graduated with honors, 47 members were inducted into Phi Beta Kappa; and two were selected as 2006-2007 Fulbright Scholars.

This, many say, is far from the norm. Consider that, in the Post survey, black male respondents consider HIV/AIDS, crime, racial discrimination, poverty, job status, drug and alcohol abuse and irresponsible parenting as large problems for African American males. Perhaps not surprising, lack of seriousness regarding education received the largest percentage of responses.

Notes one expert in the New York Times article: "There's something very different happening with young black men, and it's something we can longer ignore."



Summer Commencement speaker Shirley Franklin, mayor of Atlanta, told the class to be prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they knock. Franklin's "Next Step...The Atlanta Promise" helps Atlanta Public Schools high school seniors prepare for their futures. Last year, the program raised \$1.1 million in scholarships.