

Lift Them UP

By Add Seymour Jr.

Speakers urge graduates to use their education to empower those caught in 'the teeth of despair'

Tammy Harris could barely keep from smiling and tearing up. She was about to become the mother of a Morehouse graduate as her son, Joshua, one of approximately 440 graduating seniors, would soon become a Morehouse Man during Commencement 2009.

"To have a son finish college and me being a single parent of four, I'm excited and overwhelmed," she said as family members smiled around her. "He just did it up!"

Harris was one of an estimated 10,000

family and friends who filled the Century Campus on May 17 for the ceremony that capped off the three-day Commencement/Reunion 2009 celebration.

Hundreds of alumni, many in Morehouse hats and maroon blazers, returned to campus, especially those from classes with graduating years ending in four or nine. They were honored throughout the reunion weekend.

"This is absolutely wonderful," said 97-year-old Rynalder D. Rambeau, who was celebrating his 75th year as a

Morehouse graduate.

The 1934 graduate lit the Candle of the Mystique during the Rite of Passage ceremony on May 15 in the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel. Alumni seated on both sides of the class of 2009 shared the light from that candle with the graduating seniors, illuminating the Chapel as they all held their candles high in a moving gesture of passing the torch.

Sunny skies greeted thousands on campus on Saturday, May 16. Alumni class meetings were held throughout the



morning followed by the festive reunion picnic at B.T. Harvey Stadium. Alumni then marched from the Century Campus crypt of the College's sixth president, Benjamin E. Mays, to King Chapel. There, Bishop Charles E. Blake, presiding bishop of the Church of God in Christ and pastor of the West Angeles Church of God in Christ, challenged the seniors to reach back and help those who are less prosperous, especially those in Africa.

"These are the best of times because young people like you are graduating and embarking on a journey of service and accomplishment," he said. Blake then said these are also the worst of times as he went through a list of statistics showing how black people lag behind others in health, wealth and education, and not just in the United States, but wherever the African Diaspora deposited them.

"But this is not the time to obsess over these things," he said. "It's time for us to take charge of our destinies... I propose that God has blessed African Americans in the United States not just for ourselves, but so we can reach back to our 750 million brothers and sisters in Africa."

President Robert M. Franklin Jr. '75 presented Blake with a Presidential Award of Distinction for his community and faith-based work.

Saturday's sunny skies had darkened by Sunday morning as Commencement day started out overcast and chilly. Nevertheless, the smiles on the faces of the thousands of people who filled the Century Campus brightened the morning.

The class of 2009 received commencement reflections from Emmy-award winning actress Cicely Tyson and Harvard professor Henry Louis "Skip" Gates Jr.

In the voice of one of her most stirring characters, "Miss Jane Pittman," Tyson challenged the class of 2009 to remain steadfast leaders as they leave Morehouse and head into a difficult world.

"I would say, you are the one – each one of you," she said. "But I would ask you to



Commencement brings out an average of 10,000 relatives and friends each year.



Hank Aaron, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cicely Tyson all receive honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degrees during Commencement.

remember that life ain't going to be no crystal stair... But all the time, you'll be climbing, reaching landings, turning corners and sometimes going in the dark where there ain't no light. So I'm going to ask you not to turn back."

Gates urged the audience to be ardent supporters of the nation's affirmative action programs and to also help preserve African American history.

"My entire professional career has been an attempt to get black people our history back," he said. "Too much of our history has been lost or

buried, hidden or stolen, and I decided that when I was an undergraduate, just like you guys, that I wanted to dedicate my life to returning that history to where it belongs – into the hearts and minds of our people."

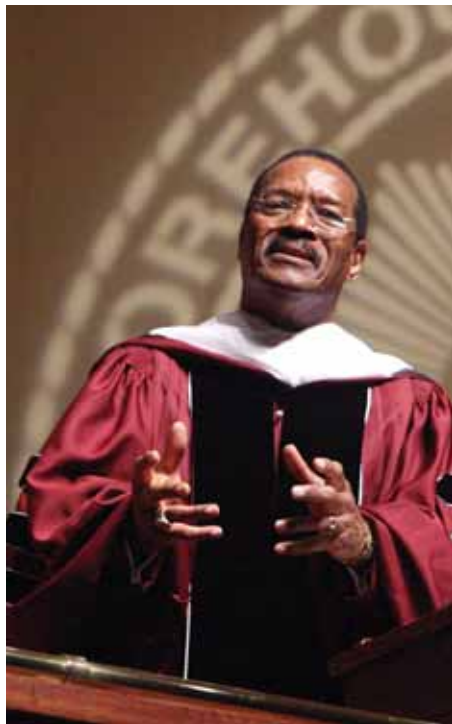
Tyson, Gates and legendary baseball player Hank Aaron each received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters.

This year, for the first time, Morehouse had two valedictorians and two salutatorians – Harris and Anthony Roberts were valedictorians while

Commencement 2009



Henry M. Goodgame '84 (second from right) leads alumni in singing "Dear Old Morehouse" during the Reunion Welcome Luncheon.



Bishop Charles E. Blake delivers the baccalaureate sermon.

Michael Blevins and Bolaji James were the salutatorians.

Blevins, a double major in theatre and economics from Richmond, Va., is a member of Phi Beta Kappa along with Roberts, Harris and James. He is moving to Los Angeles to pursue an acting and screenwriting career.

James, an economics major, claims Lagos States, Nigeria, and New York City as his hometowns. He will be working for the Colgate-Palmolive Company.

The valedictory addresses by Harris, a political science major from Thomasville, Ga., and Roberts, an economics major from Richmond, Va., were both met with standing ovations.

"What we have acquired here at Morehouse gives us the opportunity to lift someone from the teeth of despair to the voice of hope and transfer dark and desolate valleys into sun-lit paths of inner peace," Harris said.

"Thus we have no choice but to succeed because at the very moment of commitment, the entire universe conspires for our choices."

Roberts said: "Our work is finished here and the mandate is clear: we must go forth beyond this place and find our new mark and our new purpose. Class of 2009, now is our time to leave our mark on the world."

Franklin reminded the graduates of their two-word mantra, "no excuses," that they chanted in King Chapel days after the inauguration of the nation's first African American president, Barack Obama.

"Now it is up to you. The world is watching you, gentlemen," he said. "No excuses for intellectual underachievement; no excuses for unethical behavior. You have no excuses for not practicing the art of non-violence that Dr. King taught us.

"And we will accept no excuses... Up you, mighty men! You can accomplish



For more on Commencement 2009, go to www.morehouse.edu/events/2009/commencement/index.html