Commencement: Awashed in Pageantry, Ac
throughout the rain-soaked morning, the pair of concessionaries, stationed on the portico of Charles Kilgore Student Center, enjoy a brisk business. First, it is the umbrella and rain poncho vendor, who outfits scores during a spirited run on the merchandise.

However, before the day was complete, the T-shirt concessionaire, whose wares included T-shirts emblazoned with “Proud Dad of a Morehouse Grad” or “Proud Mom of a Morehouse Grad” lettering, grows more and more popular. You could find T-shirts for every relationship imaginable. There were garments for grand dads and grand mamas, for aunts and uncles, brothers and sisters, even distant cousins and good, good friends. Eager relatives, amassed four or five deep, engulfing the table, anxious to purchase one or more. By ceremony’s end, the T-shirt was the ubiquitous emblem, trumping the rain poncho as the attire of the day.

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Great, proud traditions typically outdistance the momentary milieu. You don’t need Aesop for that moral. The rain did indeed fall on the Commencement ceremony, but the celebration of accomplishment ultimately ruled the day.

The graduating seniors themselves are the best illustrations. They felt destined to fulfill the call of that hour. At times, the class roared in throaty defiance as torrent after torrent washed across them. They seemed to galvanize their strength in the maw of adversity.

“We would have been there if it were rain, sleet, hail or snow. This was a day we surely weren’t going to miss,” said Darrell Mason Gray II, biology major bound for medical school. “Nothing can stop Da’ House.”

That put the day into perspective, and framed the unforgettable backdrop for the 119th commencement ceremony honoring the Class of 2003.

It was a wet and wicked morning indeed, with rain showers so relentless that an abbreviated ceremony was, mercifully, ordained. Even the honorary degrees given to Rev. Dr. Gardner C. Taylor and Dr. Joseph Earl Marshall Jr. were hastily delivered. Commencement speaker Vernon Jordan’s address may go down in the annals of Morehouse history as the greatest commencement speech never delivered.

He did rise to the podium—but only briefly. Jordan, a high-powered Washington D.C. attorney, National Democratic Party kingmaker and veteran of many civil rights campaigns, spoke just over a minute.

There were other equally significant moments to mark the occasion. The grads were welcomed onto the main campus by an archway of their brethren, Morehouse graduates, sporting white straw hats—like Mack Stewart ’63 and Bob Mackey ’91—who formed a friendly

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“We would have been there if it were rain, sleet, hail or snow. This was a day we surely weren’t going to miss.”
Rep. Sanford D. Bishop '68 (D-2nd District, GA.) was one of many alumni to return to the House for Commencement '03.

Sing, O Muse, of the Birth of the Cosmos, Our Cosmos, Morehouse College!

...We are here today because all things in the cosmos are on an inexorable path to their highest form—the quintessence. This Commencement ceremony is the culmination of an evolutionary process, an alchemy that has activated, distilled and increased that which was already present.

The philosopher Jean Dubuis said: "Alchemy is the art of manipulating life and matter to help it evolve." For more than 136 years, through its unique alchemy, Morehouse College has helped her students evolve. It has vitiated the worst and cultivated the best human qualities in order to prepare wholly developed men. Morehouse has activated, distilled and increased intelligence, integrity, brotherhood, tolerance, compassion and character. Bringing out these qualities is neither facile nor immediate, but continually rewarding.

When I began my pursuit of higher education, I was hesitant to undergo this Morehouse transformation. I questioned whether this institution was relevant to the modern era. But, persuaded by my family and friends, I came. I reluctantly came.

During my freshman year, I began to comprehend the value of the Morehouse alchemy, to understand that the process one undergoes here is not just academic enrichment, but a life-affirming development. In the classroom, I was challenged to think beyond the superficiality of texts and ideas, to understand their assumptions and to penetrate their essence. Through discussions in Graves Hall, work with the Leadership Center and involvement with the *Maroon Tiger*, through the philosophies of the 145, and the labyrinth of Gloster Hall, I realized these extra-academic experiences also were teaching me how to use and increase the best in me.

Every moment at Morehouse was important in my alchemic process, as it was to each member of this class. Every person we encountered helped in our awakening. Now, at the end of the Morehouse road, we, the graduation class of 2003, have been activated, distilled and increased. We have been transformed.

Brothers, we leave these gates more refined, more aware of ourselves and our potential—and more aware of a world that we know to be antagonistic to us. We see it in the media, our government, the places we work and even in our daily interactions. Although we do not face the overt racism of our forefathers, we face one of a much more insidious kind. This institutional racism, characterized by inconspicuous condescension, which demeans us; debilitating favoritism, which limits us; and circuitous exclusion, which exasperates us at every turn, destroys us and our peers without our knowledge.

To fight this destructive, anti-alchemic process, we must take the lessons we learned from our Morehouse transformation and unerringly apply them to our every endeavor. Having been changed by the Morehouse alchemy, we, ourselves, must become alchemists and revolutionize the world around us. Thus, the process that we began here at Morehouse will never end—for we still have miles to go....

F. Christopher Eaglin ‘03

F. Christopher Eaglin, a 2003 Marshall Scholar, is currently attending the University of Oxford, in England, where he is pursuing a master’s degree in philosophy and development studies.
Commencement, cont’d

The gauntlet as the class paraded through the campus. When President Walter E. Massey ’58 recognized Dr. Samuel A. Nabrit ’25 as the oldest living Morehouse grad in attendance, it earned hearty, respectful applause. This ceremony even charted a little history: it inaugurated the practice of awarding degrees by the College’s three academic divisions. “They will never forget this one,” said Jerome C. Jenkins ’53, who observed the entire scene near quaint Danforth Chapel.

Jenkins fumbled for his 50-year commemorative pin to display while he recounted his own graduation, which he and his classmates celebrated during Reunion Weekend ’03. There were only 81 graduates in his class.

“Dr. Mays knew just about every kid on campus,” he recalled fondly, referring to former president Benjamin E. Mays.

Fifty years is a vast distance between Jenkins’ Class of 1953 and the Class of 2003, between these two generations of Morehouse men, between two different Americas in two different centuries. But the country was certainly no less perilous then or more promising now.

Nationally, the college-age African American male has become an endangered species. Approximately 33.8 percent of black males, ages 18-24, were in college during 2000-2001. In contrast, 43.9 percent of black women in the same age bracket attended the nation’s colleges and universities. Perhaps an even more sobering and unsettling statistic puts more young African American men in prison cellblocks than in college classrooms: 791,600 versus 603,032, according to the Justice Policy Institute, a Washington-based research and advocacy organization, in a recent study.

That seemed to be the unwitting subtext of the morning, brilliantly outlined by Fulton Christopher Eaglin in his valedictory address:

“Brothers, we leave these gates more refined, more aware of ourselves and our potential – and more aware of a world that we know to be antagonistic to us. We see it in the media, our government, the places we work, and even in our daily interactions. Although we do not face the overt racism of our forefathers, we face one of a much more insidious kind. To fight this destructive, anti-alchemic process, we must take the lessons we learned from our Morehouse transformation and unerringly apply them to our every endeavor.”

That kind of assuredness elevates Morehouse, the largest independent college educating African American men, onto a rarefied plateau and casts the College as a definitive national treasure.

“The event is a powerful statement in itself,” said Sterling Hudson, dean of seniors. “Where else can you come to see 500 African American men receive baccalaureate degrees?”

Since 1993, Morehouse has consistently graduated impressive young men in impressive numbers. Like the Class of 2003, most classes have averaged 500 graduates. And, like their brethren before them, this class made great strides.

Approximately 300 graduates entered advanced-degree programs at Harvard, Johns Hopkins, Columbia, Stanford, Howard and Ohio State universities, to list a few. Still, a significant number entered the corporate ranks of Chase Manhattan, JP Morgan and other Fortune 500 companies; while others will apply their Morehouse-honed skills to entrepreneurship.

Indeed, as the 500 young men embarked upon their personal sojourns into the “real world,” the unique, individual stories began to emerge. Rodrick Hobbs, for instance, couldn’t wait. As the ceremony waned, he broke rank and, with his biology degree cover in hand, he departed early. But he paused to reflect upon his tenure.

“It’s a great day, because so many

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THE REVEREND WILLIAM E. FLIPPIN SR. affirmed the transition of 500 Morehouse scholars to their places in the universe during the 2003 baccalaureate service held in the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel, Saturday, May 17, 2003.

Among the young scholars donned in black caps and gowns was Joseph Charles Flippin, the speaker’s youngest of three sons who, like his brothers, chose to attend Morehouse, as well as follow his father’s footsteps into the ministry.

“This is the third time my wife and I have witnessed one of our sons seated in this place after four years of sacrifice, hard work, and … rising tuition payments.

“The risk of asking a parent to preach this particular sermon is that they may lose it. …I am about to [burst] wide open…. Thank you Lord,” shouted the 51-year-old preacher of the Greater Piney Grove Baptist Church in Atlanta. Flippin is also the author of Church Etiquette: A Practical Guide for Church Behavior in the Black Church; A Workbook for Black Churches Reaching College Students, and Selected Sermons of Reverend Frank Jones.

Switching gears from proud parent to sage preacher, Flippin addressed the newest crop of Morehouse Men.

“Do not compromise goals, don’t lose heart or hope,” he advised. “Excellence has become a curse word. Mediocrity is the norm. In the face of challenges to our faith, it becomes quite easy for people with promise, purpose and potential to give up.”

Flippin spoke of the apostle Paul’s descent in the basket when the Jews sought to kill him. Although the apostle—who before his conversion once persecuted Christians—was on Jerusalem’s “most wanted list,” he defended the faith.

Flippin warned graduates that they, too, were on a hit list. But, like Paul, they must grab hold of something deep inside as if it were a rope, and hold tight.

“The rope, some may say, is the Morehouse mystic…The rope has been thrown to you…Take the rope from the white racist who once used it to place [a noose] around our necks to show superiority, to shut us up, to cause us to lose our dignity…. Hold onto the rope that benefits and serves. Tie a knot. Tie a double knot…a square knot…any other kind of knot you can think of. Hold on to the rope. Hold on to God’s unchanging hand.”

—By Merlin JnBaptiste

Unveiling the Masseys

Oil portraits of President Walter E. Massey ’58 and first lady, Shirley Massey, were unveiled during the baccalaureate services, May 2003. Their portraits now hang in the Martin Luther King Jr. International Chapel.
Beating the Odds

SENDING A CHILD TO COLLEGE can pose a financial challenge for some. But imagine sending not one, not two, but three children to college at once and dreams of them receiving degrees may seem unattainable. The Miller brothers, Cornell, Craig and Cedric, like many other African American college students, experienced several financial challenges.

For the Millers, getting accepted to Morehouse was the easy part. Staying at Morehouse was the challenge. Their mother, Carol Miller, has been unemployed due to a heart condition for nearly 10 years. To help her sons attend the College, she rented out her home in St. Louis. The twins themselves fell back on a family value they had learned years earlier as toddlers: sharing. This principle was behind their decision to attend the same college, because they would be able to share everything from off-campus living quarters to a car to textbooks.

“We took out loans, received grants and scholarships and worked full-time jobs, leaving little time for extracurricular activities,” says Craig. It was making sacrifices like these that enabled the Millers to overcome those monetary trials, making them the first triplets in Morehouse history to graduate the same year with the same major.

Surprisingly, the Millers welcome the battles, believing challenges only make them stronger. “You want a challenge because in the real world, it’s going to be hard,” says Cedric. “I think it shows you that perseverance and determination work… and that’s with anything in life.”

Later, Ms. Nash could be spotted along the departure route for the recessional, a digital camera in hand. When she spied Brandon, she waved him to a halt, slowing the procession momentarily, while she snapped his picture, a memento bound for the Nash living room mantle.

Back at the Kilgore portico, the three Bailey sisters pose for a photograph, too. They all purchased T-shirts, touting their connection with a Morehouse graduate, W. Dwight Bailey. His mother, Shirley, wore the “Proud Mama of a Morehouse Grad” shirt. His great men got their degrees today,” said the Detroit native.

You could tell he was not referring only to himself, but to his fellow graduates. Like Brandon Nash, whose mom, Vanessa Nash, encouraged her son to enter Morehouse, even though he had a free ride to any college or university in Arizona. It became singularly important, she said, primarily because Morehouse thoroughly grooms its graduates to become outstanding scholars and gentlemen.

“He is the perfect gentleman,” she said. “He’s more responsible. He’s more outgoing. He’s more rounded.”

The Miller brothers plan to start Skies the Limit, a non-profit organization aimed at empowering economically challenged youth with technology know-how. And in the tradition of giving back to their alma mater, they hope to establish a scholarship for siblings, helping families to finance the growing price of higher education. Soon after, they plan to go to law school.

Sounds like the brothers have set their sights very high, but success is possible. Says Cornell, “There is a different way. Times don’t have to be difficult. You can actually succeed in life.”

–by Cherie S. White
aunts Edna Bailey-Woody and Tara Bailey, wore their appropriate shirts.

After five years—her son was a dual-degree major in industrial engineering—Ms. Bailey has embraced her role as a Morehouse mom with aplomb.

"[Morehouse is] a school that is vested in a long, proud legacy and tradition," she said. "They come in as young men, not confident. But they leave confident in knowing who they are and of wanting to be of service to the world."

From the Century Campus, President Massey, bolstered by a megawatt amplifier, uttered his customary charge to the graduates. For persons assembled yards from the scene, his magnified, disembodied voice rolled across the campus, laden with sonorous weight and mythic echoes of prior lords of Morehouse, like Quarles, Hope and Archer, Mays and Gloster:

"Morehouse has done all it could to prepare you—personally and intellectually—for this challenge. Now, it is up to you to go out and make good on the promise. As you do, the world will be watching. The bar has been set high and some may doubt your ability to leap over it. But always remember: You are not average men, you are Morehouse Men."

With that pronouncement, the 119th Commencement ceremony became another Morehouse historic memory.

Morehouse Holds History-Making Summer Commencement

Nearly 40 Men of Morehouse made history last summer as the first class to graduate during an independent summer commencement at Morehouse. Though the graduates were fewer in number, the ceremony itself had all the pomp and circumstance of its May counterpart, including the ringing of the bell, the charge to graduates and, of course, the joy and excitement of proud parents.

Summer commencement speaker was Morehouse alumnus the Rev. Dr. Robert Michael Franklin ’78, former president of ITC and Distinguished Professor of Social Ethics at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.