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President Bergeron's 99th Commencement Address

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CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

“Making it Last”

**Remarks to the Class of 2017
by President Katherine Bergeron**

99th Commencement, Sunday, May 21, 2017

Members of the Board of Trustees both past and present; distinguished honorees and guests; colleagues in the Alumni Association and in the senior administration; faculty and staff, parents, family members, and friends; and, especially, all you soon-to-be graduates of the beautiful class of 2017, it is a pleasure to see you all here this morning; a privilege to welcome you to this much-awaited day; and a great honor to declare the 99th commencement exercises of Connecticut College now open!

Class of 2017, I have been thinking a lot in the past weeks about all that we have experienced together since I first visited this campus, as president-elect, in the fall of 2013. There have been buoyant beginnings and tragic endings; historic firsts and major milestones; renovations, reparations, and at least one dramatically ambitious reform. In your first year, we witnessed the grand opening of Zachs Hillel House, the first building dedicated to the flourishing of Jewish life on this campus. In your second year, we rejoiced at the grand re-opening of the Shain Library as a vibrant new space for collaborative learning. We cheered on the very first NESCAC championship in our history. And we celebrated the announcement of the largest gift this College has ever received in support of athletics, career education, and much-needed financial aid.

But we also lived through some hard times. We mourned together the loss of a beloved colleague and friend, Anique Ashraf, whose memory we will honor later in this ceremony with a posthumous degree. We struggled together through what I think of as a great campus awakening that helped us, as a community, begin to address the persistent histories of racial injustice that prevent us from living out our most fervent educational ideals. And then we labored together on an ambitious new curriculum that places full participation at the very center of our aspirations for this College. In all these ways, you have made a difference; you have renewed our community; you have strengthened our future. And for that, class of 2017, I will always be grateful.

And now you sit here, with all this and more behind you—with the competitions done, the medals won, the papers published, the finals finished, the theses defended, the research presented, the shows mounted. And I'm sure that some of you wish it were not ending. So I must ask you this: What will you do with all this experience? How will you take it into your lives beyond Connecticut College? How, simply put, will you make it last?

Some of you, I know, have already thought about this question. Others of you may be avoiding it. Either way, I want to pause to consider a possible response by doing two things with you: first, reflecting on something I heard in a talk here just a few weeks ago; and second (because I am a historian), telling a brief history that I hope will not only provide some perspective on where you are right now but also influence, for the better, where you could end up in the future.

The talk I'm referring to was by the Muslim interfaith activist Eboo Patel, who came to Conn at the end of April to deliver the second annual President's Distinguished Lecture. Patel, as you may know, is the founder of the Chicago-based Interfaith Youth Core, a now 15-year-old international organization dedicated to promoting greater tolerance and understanding across the globe through engaging young people in the study of faith and religious difference. His talk was autobiographical, organized around a few of the influential figures—or "guiding lights," as he put it—who had illuminated the path toward his calling. He invoked great religious leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi; he spoke about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker's movement; and then, to my surprise, he put up a slide of another historical figure who looked a bit like my maternal grandmother, someone who had inspired him in a directly personal way: it was Jane Addams. That's right, the person we know affectionately on this campus as "JA." So who was she and what was she doing in his talk? To answer that will require a small digression, so indulge me for a moment with what will be perhaps the very last history lesson of your Conn career.

I am sure you have wondered about this name, too, which adorns the residence hall behind you to your left, on the southwest corner of the campus. Unlike Harkness, or Plant, or Smith, or Freeman, or Emily Abby, all named for various benefactors, Jane Addams had no direct connection to this College. She likely had more of a connection to Eboo Patel, with her ties to the city of Chicago and her support of what might be considered the first intentional interfaith community in the United States.

She was, in fact, the founder of Hull House, a settlement that she opened in 1889, when she was just 29 years old, in an abandoned mansion on the west side of Chicago. The idea was simple. Chicago had seen a huge influx of European immigrants seeking work in urban factories and mills at the end of the 19th century. These underserved populations needed education, healthcare, childcare, and other vital services. Affluent women like Addams were poised to make a difference through a focus on what she called the three R's: residence, research, and reform. The residents of the settlement committed not just to sharing their wealth but to living with and learning from the people they sought to help; to deepening their own knowledge of social problems and root causes through rigorous sociological inquiry; and to achieving systemic changes through political organization and legislative action. If Addams had begun Hull House as a scholar who believed that the liberal arts could enrich the lives of a broader spectrum of society, she ended as an activist who fought for women's rights, children's rights, immigrant rights, fair labor standards, and social welfare reform.

Jane Addams died in 1935, at the age of 75, still at the settlement in the West Side of Chicago where she had been living for over 40 years. The very next year, in 1936, Connecticut College named its newest residence hall after her. By that point, Addams was something of a household name, and Hull House a well-respected community institution occupying an entire city block and

boasting Chicago's first public playground, public gymnasium, public pool, and public kitchens, as well as a thriving community theater and day-care center. Addams herself had evolved from a young woman who believed in the transformative power of the liberal arts into a committed political figure with a national profile. By the 1930s, she had won the Nobel Peace Prize and become a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union and the NAACP. No wonder Katharine Blunt, the president of Connecticut College at the time, called her "one of the country's greatest citizens." Jane Addams would be a guiding light for all those women seeking to make a difference with their education in the 1930s.

Could she be that same light for us now, in 2017? It seems so. In fact, I have to tell you: the very same day that Eboo Patel came to speak on this campus, David Brooks ran an opinion piece in the New York Times extolling the virtues of none other than Jane Addams. Brooks began by noting that "many of the social problems we face today—the fraying social fabric, widening inequality, anxieties over immigration, concentrated poverty—are the same problems she faced 130 years ago."¹ And he went on to suggest that her creative approach to those problems was far more thoughtful and nuanced than the bureaucratic solutions we often see deployed today.

Patel was making a similar point, in a way. But what struck me most in his account of Addams was not so much the historical analogy; or the fact that she had immersed herself in the communities she sought to support; or that she had created one of the first interfaith organizations in the country; or even that she had committed her considerable wealth to the common good. All of these things were, of course, exemplary and important. What struck me most was his simple observation that Addams, who as a woman in her twenties wanted to change the world, was still working at it 46 years later. In the end, he noted, Jane Addams didn't just follow her passion. She had made something that lasted.

And that, I believe, is something you, too, should think about as you imagine the lives you will lead beyond this hill. In an era of twitter activism and disposable conviction; of infinitely divided attention and fragmented social networks: how will you make something that lasts? How will you make something that lasts? People may tell you that it's all about setting goals: "Think about where you want to end up and keep your eyes on the prize." And that may even be good advice. But, to be honest, I do not think that is how it really works, or, at least, how it worked for Addams. Her success, paradoxically, was less about looking far into the future than about staying rooted in the present. For her, the prize was not the national platform she eventually built but the vision of a new community closer to home that she had conceived so many years before, in an effort to address the social inequities of her time and to put her education into action. Her genius, you could say, was in her attention span: she spent the rest of her life learning how to do it better.

In 1936, when JA opened at this College, a plaque mounted in the living room bore a quote from Addams that offers some perspective on her success. The plaque is still there. "To make progress," it says, "requires great patience, freedom from any spirit of hate or revenge, and the unremitting and never ending search for the truth"...Just three things, my friends: patience, love, and truth. I would like to offer these words as a guiding light to you on this morning of your commencement. Your education at Connecticut College has prepared you well to do as Addams did: to put your education into action; to make the change that you envision; to make something

that lasts. So stay the course. Be steadfast in your conviction. And never stop learning how to do it better.

Class of 2017, we love you, we are proud of you, we know you will go on to make a difference in the world with patience and humility. Thank you for bringing your talent, your passion, and your idealism to this special place. I wish you great happiness and success in your life after Connecticut College, and I look forward to seeing you back here often and welcoming you home.

(Remarks as prepared by President Katherine Bergeron.)

¹David Brooks, "The Jane Addams Model," *New York Times*, April 25, 2017