

**COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY OMB DIRECTOR JACOB LEW
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HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY; HEMPSTEAD, NY
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Thank you, Martina, for that kind introduction.

Principal Gootnick, faculty, and staff, thank you all for giving me this chance to come back to my alma mater, Forest Hills High School, in this, its 70th year.

Class of 2011, let me just say: you did it. You read the books, conducted the experiments, took the tests – including your Regents, and did the hard work to get to this moment. Congratulations.

And to the mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, brothers and sisters, friends, family, and neighbors sitting here today – you did it too!

You did the even harder work of making sure the books were read, the tests were studied for, and your Forest Hills student got out the door, on the subway, or on the bus in time. And for that, Class of 2011, please join me in congratulating all the people in your lives who helped you get to this moment.

When Principal Gootnick invited me to speak at this year's graduation, I was honored to accept. As an alum, it is great to be back and share in your moment of celebration.

When my children noticed that I appear on a website listing notable alumni, they were pretty impressed that I was listed ahead of the Ramones and ahead of Simon and Garfunkel. Of course, that brief moment of glory ended when it turned out that the list was in alphabetical order. But truthfully, it is an honor to be first or last on that list.

Now, I won't test your patience with a song today – I can guarantee that. And if I did, I don't think I would help one bit in a SING re-match against the junior class.

But I do want to share a few thoughts with you as you complete your high school years and set forth on the next step in your journey through life.

Rest assured, I will be guided by the wisdom from many years of attending graduations and commencements: that the only good speech is a short one.

Now, I must confess that the last time I attended a Forest Hills graduation, my hair was considerably longer and my preferred attire were torn jeans and desert boots – you saw the pictures. And, at that time, I thought I would end up changing the world as a journalist.

I grew up on Yellowstone and Jewel. My dad was a lawyer whose real love was books, so he also ran a mail-order rare book business. My mom was an office manager who graduated high school when she was 15 and right away went to work to help her family make it through the Great Depression.

I lived for the Mets – and just as today, they usually broke my heart. Except of course when the Miracle Mets of 1969 melted the heart of our school administration, and the entire school listened to the end of that miracle season over the PA system.

And when I wasn't spending time writing and editing the Beacon, the Forest Hills High School newspaper, I was drawn to the important issues of the day from public housing in Queens to anti-war protests, the first Earth day, and the New York March on Hunger.

In retrospect, I am not sure why I thought our principal, Mr. Balsar, could end the war in Vietnam, but he encouraged us to make our voices heard.

A lot has changed since I was sitting where you sit today. My hair is definitely shorter, and my jeans have given way to a business suit. And, sadly, I understand that the Internet just recently put the *Beacon* out of business. But some important things have not changed.

First, you and I are both fortunate to have graduated from the greatest public school system in the world – the New York City public schools.

In Washington, I spend my days now working on reducing the national debt – which my generation should not leave behind as a burden for yours. And this is all about making choices, and President Obama has made it clear that investing in quality, public education is one of his highest priorities.

We have all the studies and the data we need. But for me, this is not an abstract public policy debate. I have seen in my own life how public schools are the key to opening up the door of opportunity.

My father came to this country as a young boy and learned English in the New York City public schools. He went on to become an attorney, and his son went on to advise Presidents.

Many of you graduating today are the first in your family to attend an American high school, and will be the first in your family to go to college.

As a class, you already have accomplished so much: starting a Robotics Club that in its first year competed nationally and was recognized as rookie of the year; putting on a Broadway-quality production of “42nd Street” here on 110th Street; serving on youth court to help kids who are in trouble find a better path; arguing your way to Albany in the “We the People” competition; winning the city tennis and track championships; excelling at the some of the most advanced levels of science and math as part of the Carl Sagan Academy; and the list goes on and on.

Your parents and family and friends never had any doubt that you could do this -- and more. That's why your teachers pushed and encouraged you and made themselves available not just during the school day, but also on weekends and after school.

What Forest Hills gave you was the chance to discover and nurture your unique gifts. That, in many ways, is the opportunity of a lifetime.

The story of what you do with that opportunity will be written over the thousands of days that follow today's ceremony.

This class is so diverse and so talented that I know you will do extraordinary things across a countless number of fields. But there is one thing, today, that I ask all of you to do: and that is to reach out beyond the boundaries of your self, your neighborhood, and your comfort level to make a difference in the world.

This is a responsibility that I believe all of us have as Americans, as New Yorkers, and especially as graduates of Forest Hills. We have been given so much, and it is our responsibility to give back.

I know what I am saying is nothing new to this class. It is something I learned at Forest Hills decades ago, and it's something that you too have learned over these past years.

We see it in the hours spent volunteering to clean up the local parks, visiting nursing homes, interning in local hospitals, and tutoring younger children. We see it in those who devoted their energy to the special law and public service programs here at Forest Hills and in those who are pursuing careers in the health professions. And we see it, especially, in the young men and women in the Class of 2011 who already have enlisted in -- or are planning to join -- our nation's armed services upon graduation. Your selfless patriotism is an inspiration to us all.

As we look to the challenges facing the United States and the world, we need all of you to get involved and to stay involved.

There are many ways to serve. It can be by joining the helping professions or by working in the public sector; by serving in Americorps or as a volunteer in your community.

We need engaged citizens – who do not take for granted the freedoms and the opportunities that America gives its people.

We need young people eager to learn, not afraid to work hard, and who are looking for opportunities to build the connections that form a strong society.

And we need men and women who never will shy away from asking tough questions or pointing out when people in power need to do better. Which is another way of saying that America needs its New Yorkers.

Not only because we know how to speak our mind, and – let's just say – we are not shy about that; but also because the New York story is the classic American story.

In each generation, people come to our five boroughs in search of a better life. They study hard and go to public high schools like Forest Hills. And by never accepting limits and always believing that there's nothing they can't do, they find themselves at the top of our biggest

companies, filling concert halls and theaters, and – yes – sitting in the Oval Office advising Presidents.

When I, as a high school student, had a vision of a future in journalism, I never thought that I would end up where I did. And I urge you all to follow your passions and interests even if it's not the direction you that you started out with.

One thing is for sure: you'll be prepared.

Not a day goes by when I am not thankful for what this city – that I still call home -- and this high school gave me, and where I do not try my hardest to give the same kind of breaks that I got to all the kids who came after me.

So, Class of 2011, as you look out ahead to all that lies before you, never forget where you came from or the sacrifices – large and small -- that your family had to make to bring you to this moment.

Never forget the opportunities that this school, its teachers, and staff gave you so that you could begin to unlock the amazing talents and skills that you have.

And even if you find yourself thousands of miles from Austin Street and the Queens Center Mall, always remember the friends, the teachers, and the lessons that you learned here at Forest Hills.

Because if you do, I know that you will succeed beyond your dreams, and that you will – in whatever way you can – make sure that those who come after you will as well.

Class of 2011, today is your day. The future is yours. And congratulations on a job well done.

Thank you.