

Good evening graduates, families and friends of the graduates, and the Silberman School Of Social Work faculty and staff. It is a wonderful privilege to be here with you tonight; thank you Dean Mondros for inviting me. Congratulations to all of you who worked hard for your degrees while simultaneously working hard at your jobs and at taking care of your families. So, actually, for the past several years, most of you have been holding down three jobs. The fact that you are here today at this ceremony means you are not only master social workers but master jugglers as well.

One of my earliest memories as a child is listening to the sound of a really old-fashioned typewriter clacking away as i was falling asleep. This was the sound of my mother typing my father's term papers as he finished college at night at Hofstra ... while working full time and caring for his family. He did it with the help of my mother and his children. So I know that it really does take a village and a supportive family to finish school at night and on weekends... as lots of you in the audience certainly must know! Can we hear a round of applause for families and friends of the graduates?

And today I have that very antique typewriter sitting in a place of honor on a bookshelf in my apartment. It was a remarkable accomplishment when my dad finished school 50 years ago and it is a remarkable accomplishment today for all of you. So is there another round of applause for the graduates?

I believe that the reason I was asked to speak at this ceremony is because of my decades of work as an advocate for people in need in this city and because I tend to be outspoken in my belief that social services are effective , worth fighting for and truly can change lives. As the head of united neighborhood houses, the federation of 37 nonprofit organizations in NYC called settlement houses, my job is focused on making it possible for these agencies to do their jobs well in their neighborhoods across the city. In order to do so, they clearly need resources, meaning support from government and

philanthropy, and they need an environment where the work their staff does is valued and recognized by the larger society in order to ensure that those resources keep flowing.

One of the reasons I was pleased to be given the opportunity to talk with you this evening is because I believe our city, state and nation are at a crossroads in terms of our commitment to poor people, to the agencies that work with them, and therefore to the social work profession itself. I wanted to have a chance to talk about what I think is going on around us and the part you can play in the future to ensure that we maintain a city that has a commitment to fairness and social justice.

When government programs for the poor are routinely attacked and denounced, which is increasingly the case, that constitutes an attack on our profession as well, whether we work for city government, which many of you do, or for nonprofit organizations. There is a profound debate going on in this country regarding the role and responsibility of government to support a safety net, whether for families, the elderly or low-wage workers... and the outcome of the debate undoubtedly will affect all of us.

I know you have chosen as your graduation theme “remembering the past, being present today, and shaping the future”. I would argue that some of our government leaders and candidates have been doing a lousy job of remembering the past. Those that want to cut back so severely on Medicaid and Medicare benefits, on public assistance and food stamps, on public education and housing subsidies have failed to remember what our country was like before these social welfare programs were in place. Those who want to strip away these and other new deal programs that originated at a time of great depression in this country, the 1930s, have forgotten that we were a nation characterized by shantytowns, bread lines, infant mortality, rampant tuberculosis, substandard housing and no access to college for most Americans.

It was government that provided the impetus to address and solve these problems, and I believe it must be government again in our era that leads us forward. And let's not kid ourselves. Government benefits are not just for poor people. We in the middle class benefit just as much as others through government support, whether it's through mortgage deductions, veterans benefits, publicly subsidized education... even knowing that our roads will be repaired and that our transit system will work (at least most of the time!). In fact, government helps equalize the growing income disparity that we've been hearing so much about lately. While the private marketplace functions well for many of us, many are left behind or left out. So while government is critical for all of us, it is particularly important that government services and support be there for the most vulnerable, whether they need publicly subsidized child care, after school, job training services, medical care or English classes. I can tell you as a taxpayer (who pays more than 15% by the way) that I would prefer my tax dollars go to a childcare, job training or college prep program than to jails and prisons. Because you know, we will end up paying one way or the other, so let's invest our money up front to prevent problems rather than trying to fix them when it's usually too late and very expensive.

You, as newly minted social workers, have an important role to play in this great debate. The glorious history of the social work profession includes dozens of national leaders who were the original advocates for social welfare programs. In the early 1900s these advocates were called social reformers. As the head of the federation of settlement houses in New York City for the last decade, I am keenly aware of, and remain tremendously impressed by the stories of our early settlement house pioneers, like Lillian Wald and Jane Addams, whose picture is front and center in the lobby of Hunter's new Social Work building. These women – and at that time most of our leaders were indeed women – were the leading social reformers of their age, advocates for important reforms such as child labor laws, fair housing, and union movements. Though their work preceded the formal establishment of the social

work profession, they created the tradition of advocacy, activism and civic engagement that it is now our duty to maintain.

And you do not have to be a professional advocate like I am to carry on this fight for fairness. As a front-line social worker or supervisor in the field, whether working in child welfare or homelessness or probation, it is really possible to make a difference.

I need to detour on a slight tangent here. I think it is enormously important that social workers seek out and present themselves for leadership posts, whether in government or nonprofit work. There are too few of us in these positions today. I think it makes a difference when our leaders are social workers, rather than lawyers or business school graduates. Social work ultimately and essentially is about helping people do better. If there's one thing you've learned from your hunter experience I hope it is the importance of approaching the work with a set of core values. That means that when social workers are agency executives or commissioners or policy advisors that they bring to the table a management style that respects a diversity of voices, that is inclusive of various points of view, that ultimately sees clients as having dignity and strength, not just as problems to be fixed.

And I believe social workers are especially well-qualified to become advocates. We bring both credibility and passion; believe it or not, some of us actually talk to real clients and consumers before we make sweeping statements about them. Wouldn't it be nice if some of our elected officials gave that a try?

Now back to my main point and to last part of your theme, "shaping the future". Another core value of our profession is the urgency of addressing the social conditions that lead to individual problems and challenges; it is not sufficient to simply "treat" the presenting problem. This is based on the understanding that greater forces – like poor education, poor housing, low wages, poverty – underlie many of the individual and family problems we see. If we fail to shape the future by working on the

larger issues that underpin chronic poverty and dysfunction among the people we serve, we all are fated to stay firmly rooted in the stagnant place we're now in, struggling to catch crumbs from the table for our clients.

you are part of the solution. Now that you've graduated and have eliminated one of your jobs, you have a chance to get involved in your communities. Leaders of community boards, PTAs, block associations, tenant associations and nonprofit boards are often social workers who know that building communities of people in common cause is often the most effective way to change conditions.

Encouraging your clients, friends and family members to vote is another way to make a difference. I can assure you that the people who are opposed to what we do are busy organizing voters. Let us not be complacent about this; if we are, we will continue to lose.

When we learn that city or state government is cutting programs we believe in... sign the petition, send the email, don't sit back. Our governmental leaders need to hear from us. Twenty years ago, I worked at City Hall for Mayor David Dinkins and I can assure you that elected and appointed officials count letters and emails when they make decisions.

Many of us, because we're professionals and have mortgages and children and jobs we want to keep, have become a bit passive about social change. We don't want to rock the boat. We just keep our heads down. We might complain, but only in private. Maybe it's time to take some risks and return to our social reformer roots. No matter how you feel personally about the occupy Wall Street movement, there's no denying that this small group of people has managed to change the dialogue in this country. In a short time they've introduced a new phrase into the language— 99% and 1% - and even have gotten everyone talking about income disparity and inequality. Is there a lesson there for the rest of us? I know that lots of people don't like it when issues of class or race are raised in this country, and you can

really open yourself to attack when you do. But remember that two days ago we celebrated Dr. Martin Luther King, who was courageous, but very unpopular when he raised economic justice issues, even more than when he challenged the status quo through his work on racial justice. His message about economic justice is echoed in the occupy movement today... so we know there's still much work to do and still much courage required. .

In closing, I don't think I need to remind you that these are difficult times economically for all of us, but particularly for low-income people, those living on fixed incomes and those working in low wage jobs. Programs we care about and that have been proven effective are on the chopping block. Nevertheless, I firmly believe that if we exercise our voices we can protect our social safety net. The history of social welfare policy in this country is like a giant pendulum swinging back and forth between expansion and retrenchment. Let's all of us give that pendulum a giant push by showing that the work we do is successful and by becoming the activists and social reformers of our time.

Thanks very much, congratulations and best of luck to all of you.