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**Opera star Renée Fleming urges students to ‘find their voices’**

Famed soprano delivers Northwestern’s commencement address, inspiring through speech and song

EVANSTON, Ill. — Mixing poignant observations about life with humor and a hefty dose of operatic singing, famed soprano Renée Fleming encouraged graduates at Northwestern’s 160th commencement ceremony Friday to find their voices – and to use them to help make the world a better place.

“I’m not just talking about singing,” said Fleming, one of the most celebrated voices on the planet. “I’m talking about finding your voice, developing it and caring for it, and making it heard for years to come. A successful singer has a unique timbre, one that is immediately recognizable. Your time at Northwestern has already helped you begin to find your distinctive sound.”

A steady rain forced graduates to don clear plastic ponchos atop their purple regalia, but the inclement weather did little to dampen the graduates’ spirits – or blunt Fleming’s message.

Backed by a chorus of student singers who wove in soaring gospels, sung quotes from rapper Kendrick Lamar and even riffed on the wedding reception staple “Chicken Dance,” Fleming used both music and humor to drive home her point: that it is up to the graduates to make an impact, raise their voices in the world and “enrich our lives.” The opportunities, she said, are plentiful.

“Ask yourself, ‘Who can hear me? Where can I make a difference?’ Are you an activist speaking to many? Maybe you’re a therapist, helping one person at a time,” Fleming said. “You will have a platform and a responsibility to amplify the voices of those who don’t have agency; those living in poverty, the world’s animal life threatened by human environmental abuses and children at our borders.”

An estimated 10,000 people attended the weather-shortened 80-minute ceremony at Ryan Field, which honored 6,151 students who earned undergraduate and graduate degrees. A livestream of the event was broadcast to viewers around the world.

Northwestern President Morton Schapiro drew some of the loudest cheers of the day when he promised to keep the proceedings short because of the rain, acknowledging that while “we’re tough in the Midwest,” some might be cozier watching the ceremony at home via the live feed.

“I apologize for the rain,” President Schapiro said. “When I walked in with Renée, I asked the students in the back row if I should accelerate it a little, and they were drowning and they said ‘yes.’ So we are going to make it a little bit faster than we normally do.”

True to his promise, many speakers’ remarks were abbreviated and degrees were conferred en masse.

The featured speaker, Fleming, also acknowledged the rain, joking that she would cut her “hour-long remarks down to 40 minutes.” She clocked in at less than half of that.

Often called “The People’s Diva,” Fleming is a four-time Grammy Award winner, was the first classical artist to sing the national anthem at a Super Bowl and has been presented with the National Medal of Arts, the highest award given to artists by the U.S. government. Her daughter, Sage Ross, graduated from Northwestern in 2017.

To deliver Northwestern’s commencement address, she flew in from New York, where she stars as Nettie Fowler in the Broadway revival of “Carousel.” Her popularity has spread far beyond the opera and Broadway, deeply into popular culture. Her voice is heard on the soundtracks of “The Lord of The Rings,” “Three Billboards Outside Ebbing Missouri” and this year’s Oscar winner for best picture, “The Shape of Water.”

Throughout her speech, Fleming peppered her words with pop culture references, including nods to Northwestern alumni – and previous commencement speakers – Stephen Colbert, Seth Meyers and Julia Louis Dreyfus, whose names were sung gloriously by the student choir. She also referenced 2003 graduate Meghan Markle, saying she once sat next to Markle’s future father-in-law, Prince Charles, while performing at Buckingham Palace.

“I can say with authority, ‘The prince was charming,’” Fleming said, as the student singers broke into a rendition of late pop star Prince’s hit “Purple Rain.”

“No, no, no, no, no – not that Prince,” Fleming deadpanned. “But I do like purple and it is raining.”

She was, at times, serious as well, urging the graduates to cut through the noise and focus on what’s important.

“Today it’s easy to feel that our voices don’t matter,” she said. “We’re faced with a barrage, a cacophony of sound, 24/7. It’s like everyone is singing a different song at the same time, but ever louder, trying to be the only voice that’s hear. … We divas have to protect our voices and use them wisely. We don’t waste our capital. I won’t be talking in a loud restaurant for two hours if I need to be heard the next day when it counts. Invest your energy, rather, in interactions that are meaningful.”

**Rain ‘makes it more memorable’**

Allie Woodson, one of the students who sang in the choir alongside Fleming, said working with the famed opera singer was an incredible opportunity.

“It feels like a master class and someone imparting wisdom down on us, and we have to soak up everything she says and does,” Woodson said. “Because she is obviously successful and has done well for herself and is a beacon of what Northwestern can do.”

Adwaith Nair, a graduating senior from Cedar Knolls, New Jersey, said the weather, for the most part, did not bother him.

“Obviously I think it would be better if it was sunny, but that’s not really what this is all about,” Nair said. “Even though it’s raining, I’m still super excited.”

Alex Nelson, a graduating biology major from La Porte, Indiana, was similarly unphased.

“I like the rain,” he said. “It adds another element that makes it more memorable.”

Parent Ferdinand Nwagbo sat in the wet Ryan Field stands to cheer on his daughter, Nnenna Nwagbo, who was graduating from the McCormick School of Engineering. Like the other family members, Ferdinand Nwagbo was sporting a purple T-shirt with a photo of his graduate.

“We do what we have to do, rain or shine,” Ferdinand Nwagbo said.

**‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’**

Back on stage, in his introduction of Fleming, Class of 2018 student John Franklin noted it was fitting that Fleming is currently starring as Nettie in the revival of “Carousel” on Broadway, because in the musical she performs the song “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” which he said “embodies the everlasting support” of all of the people who have touched the graduates’ lives over the years.

That includes Fleming, he said.

“Aside from her iconic lyric soprano, it’s her commitment to advocacy and leadership that makes her especially extraordinary,” Franklin said. “She incorporates music and the arts into society however and wherever she can, ensuring that everyone gets exposure.”

He cited Fleming’s charitable work, highlighting her efforts to bring together Arab and Jewish children in Israel to study and perform classical music.

“Renée recognizes how music positively impacts society and hasn’t let up on giving her support, no matter how far she’s soared in her career,” Franklin said. “I find this deeply inspiring and thank her tremendously for putting the arts into everyone’s hands.”

**Honorary degrees**

Four people – Fleming, William Osborn, Subra Suresh and Sheldon Harnick – received honorary degrees. In introducing Fleming, Provost Jonathan Holloway, called Fleming a generous mentor who already has deep ties to Northwestern.

“Your glorious voice and consummate artistry have thrilled audiences from the Metropolitan Opera to Buckingham Palace to the Super Bowl,” Holloway said. “You are inspiring tomorrow’s vocal luminaries, helping ensure that the musical arts will continue to flourish.”

**High school teachers honored**

For the eighth year in a row, President Schapiro paid tribute to five high school teachers who inspired graduating seniors and had a lasting impact on their lives. Each were honored with a [Distinguished Secondary Teacher Award](https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2018/may/distinguished-secondary-teacher-awards/), which recognizes teachers from across the country who were nominated by members of the senior class.

“I thank them for their contribution to the senior class and for sharing their extraordinary talents with so many,” President Schapiro said, before asking them to stand to be recognized.

President Schapiro then recognized all the others who helped the graduates make it to this day.

“It has been a great joy to observe heartwarming celebrations,” he said. “Not a single graduate would be here today without the support and encouragement of so many of you in the audience.”

As has become a tradition, the president then asked the parents and step-parents of the graduates to stand, so the students could turn and give them a round of applause. Next, he asked the grandparents to stand, followed by siblings, spouses, children, aunts and uncles, cousins, “other family members I can’t think of” and, finally, friends.

**Rely on each other**

On behalf of the Class of 2018, Sumaia Masoom recalled her first days on campus, after arriving to Evanston from rural Wisconsin. She said that on her first day at Northwestern, she was so intimidated by her fellow “well-prepared” classmates, she called her mom, cried on the phone and asked her mom to bring her home.

“I’ve never been so grateful to have my wishes ignored,” Masoom said.

She said it wasn’t just graduating from Northwestern that made her and her fellow graduates special. It was what they learned along the way – and how to use that knowledge to thrive.

“We quickly learned the value of a coffee-order name, and later, the name you use to hide yourself from employers on Facebook,” Masoom joked. “Most importantly, whether you met your true love on day one of Wildcat Welcome in your PA group, or you’re more like me and your most intimate college relationship was with the Norris Subway, here, because of Northwestern, we learned the importance of loving and relying on each other through not just the good and bad times, but the just so-so times, all while doing everything whole-heartedly – and nothing halfway.”

**More about the honorary degree recipients**

Along with Fleming, [honorary degrees](https://news.northwestern.edu/stories/2018/february/opera-legend-and-three-others-to-receive-honorary-degrees/) were given to:

**William O. Osborn**, who chaired Northwestern’s Board of Trustees from 2009 to 2017. He previously served as vice chair and is a member of the board’s Executive, Finance and Northwestern Medicine Committees. He is also a member of the University’s We Will Campaign Steering Committee and the Kellogg School of Management’s Global Advisory Board and Campaign Committee. Osborn served as chairman (1995-2009) and CEO (1995-2007) of Northern Trust Corporation, the international financial services company headquartered in Chicago.

**Subra Suresh**, one of the world’s top researchers in materials science and engineering and its intersection with biotechnology. He is president and distinguished professor at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University and was previously president of Carnegie Mellon University, director of the National Science Foundation and dean of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s School of Engineering.

**Sheldon Harnick**, one of the most honored lyricists in American musical theater. After serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, Harnick earned a music degree from Northwestern University. After graduation, he wrote songs for Broadway revues before achieving fame as a lyricist for book musicals. His shows, along with longtime collaborator Jerry Bock, included the best-musical Tony Awards winners “Fiorello!” (which also won the Puliter Prize for Drama) and “Fiddler on the Roof,” for which he and Bock won the Tony for best music and lyrics.

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