

**HOWARD UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF DENTISTRY COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY**  
**MAY 6, 2022**

Thank you, Dr. Andrea Jackson, for that kind introduction and for the opportunity to address the 2022 graduating class of the Howard University College of Dentistry.

Let me start by offering my congratulations to today's graduates. Your hard work has paid off! And even heartier congratulations to the families of the graduates, whose support has been essential to your achievement. You can all say that you now have a doctor in the family, and I know how much that means. My late mother always wanted me to be a doctor, but I could not fulfill that expectation. However, I did satisfy my mother's goal to ensure that we had a doctor in the family by marrying my wife, Marion. Marion is a critical care physician who retired a few years back and is with us for today's event. She now devotes much of her time to advancing access to oral health care in Africa.

You may be wondering why Dean Jackson and the Howard administration invited me to speak with you today. I'm a businessperson and not a dentist. I was born in South Africa, not the United States. What could I offer to a Howard dental graduate that might be meaningful and relevant on this very special day? That's a fair question.

I will begin to answer that question by saying that you are graduating into a unique, exciting, and transformative era for health care. It is becoming clearer that dentistry is a vital component of the health care spectrum, with so many studies that have emerged over the last decade or so increasingly showing the direct correlation between good oral care and good overall health. Having said this, graduating with a degree in dentistry today from a top dental school is a wonderful achievement. Each person graduating today has the opportunity to be a great dentist. But I would like to challenge you today to go even further and choose to make a difference in society by using your dental degree.

Take my experience, for example. I was educated to be an accountant, which is another great profession. But in addition to being an accountant (I was not such a good one, I might add), I wanted to be a businessperson in a company with a higher purpose than simply making money – a company with the additional purpose of addressing society's needs. From my earliest years, my parents encouraged my brother and me to prepare for a productive professional career, but they also instilled in us the importance of making a difference in the lives of others. I know you agree with this philosophy, or you would not be sitting here today.

As life marched on, I benefitted by adopting the philosophy of doing well professionally by doing good for society, which may seem like a daunting task for a young person. The poet Robert Frost famously reflected on the importance of making life choices in his poem about encountering a fork in the road, taking the road less traveled, and this choice making all the difference. I could have continued being an accountant, but I chose to follow a less clear path to becoming a businessperson with the added goal of making a positive contribution to society, and that has made all the difference for me.

So here is a thought that has stayed with me throughout my journey in life—“think big.” I have been motivated by the idea that the late Senator Robert Kennedy made famous: “Some men (and women) see things as they are and say, ‘why?’ I dream things that never were and say, ‘why not?’” “Thinking small” will keep us safe, but likely stationary. However, if we “think big” and never accept no, we may achieve goals that appear impossible. I have come to realize that “why not?” is one of the most important questions to continually ask oneself throughout one’s life.

As a graduate today, you have an opportunity to be a great dentist, and you also have the opportunity to take the road less travelled, to dream big, and contribute to society in your own unique way. That is my challenge to you today – think big! Why not?

This idea of a broader perspective is clear in the story of the person who encounters three bricklayers and asks each worker what they are doing. The first worker says, “I’m laying bricks.” The second says, “I’m helping to build a wall.” The third says, “I’m building a beautiful cathedral.” Everyone here today has that opportunity to build a beautiful cathedral with your life, if you have the vision, drive and commitment, and if you are willing to go through the struggle to achieve the success and not accept no for an answer.

Having the vision, drive and commitment still requires one last ingredient – courage to pursue the big dream. Health care professionals hold a special place of respect in society, and as a Howard dental graduate, your colleagues and your patients will look to you as a leader. They will seek out your opinions and trust your judgment. I encourage you to use your platform to help society move forward. One important lesson from my personal hero, the late South African President Nelson Mandela, is that “courage is not the absence of fear – but the triumph over it.” It is okay to be fearful, but please be courageous in overcoming that fear as a leader promoting your ideas.

As Howard dental graduates, you have already achieved a lot. I can’t presume to provide you with advice on where you can make the best contribution, but here are some big thoughts to potentially inspire you to dream big in how you can make a difference.

The first is advancing health care equity and access to care. In addition to the growing income inequality that we are seeing around the world, including here in the United States, there is an enormous gap in health care equity and access to health care among populations. As part of the health care community, there is an important role for each of us in helping to address this disparity.

There are health care missions to disadvantaged communities that you can be a part of in partnership with your dental team here at Howard or with many credible NGOs operating globally and in your local communities. In fact, for 18 years, Henry Schein has supported Howard University’s terrific global student outreach program. There also are broad-based programs, like the American Dental Association’s Give Kids a Smile, for which Henry Schein was

a founding sponsor. In two weeks, Howard will once again host a Give Kids a Smile event. Dr. Latoya Barham, who spearheads the Give Kids a Smile program at Howard, has hosted this event for many years and is a former Howard student. Her commitment has enhanced the lives of hundreds of children over the years. Dr. Barham's example reflects exactly the kind of positive and enduring impact you can have as a Howard dental graduate. This would be a great place to start on your professional journey as a graduating dentist to reduce the health equity gap.

The second area is diversity and cultural competency in the health care professions, which are essential because earning a patient's trust is the foundation to successful treatment. I learned the importance of diversity at a very young age. My brother and I grew up in a neighborhood in Port Elizabeth, South Africa called South End. South End was wonderful – a melting pot of different cultures all living and working in harmony. About a decade after my parents arrived in South Africa as refugees from Nazi Germany, the horrific system of apartheid began to separate people across the country. By the late 1960s, South End was thriving as a one of the few remaining fully integrated communities in the entire country. But the apartheid regime ultimately destroyed the vibrant harmony of our South End community. Neighbors were forced apart, and my parents, friends, and hundreds of small business owners had to relocate to segregated neighborhoods. We lost the richness of the diversity I had known in my formative years.

In South Africa, we saw first-hand extreme examples and consequences of racial injustice and prejudice. Many of these issues we unfortunately continue to grapple with here in the United States. Ultimately, Marion and I summoned our courage and chose to leave our home in apartheid South Africa. We knew life would be harder but did not want to raise a family within a fundamentally unjust society. We eventually arrived at the shores of New York City, another diverse cultural melting pot, where we were welcomed with open arms, felt most comfortable, and began to build our new lives.

This experience inspired me to encourage Team Schein to focus on advancing diversity and cultural competency in the health care community, and we've been doing this for over three decades. In 1994, we first met Dr. Hazel Harper, then President-Elect of the National Dentistry Association, and discovered how similar the mission and goals of Henry Schein and the NDA were. Henry Schein began a leadership training and speaker development program for the NDA and helped establish the ADA Institute for Diversity Leadership.

We also had the courage to address a difficult issue by bringing together NDA President Dr. Greg Stout and ADA President Dr. Greg Chadwick – the “two Gregs of dentistry” – at a dinner for Medical Education for South African Blacks. These two important professional organizations had a distant relationship for years, but this dinner meeting led to a closer alignment between the NDA and the ADA.

Yet another example stems from a meeting we hosted a quarter century ago, the Dental Diversity in Leadership Conference in New York, the first effort of its kind. I am pleased to report

that two of the attendees of that leadership conference attended the last Greater New York Dental Meeting before the COVID pandemic, as the president of the ADA and the chairman of the GNYDM. You never know how far and wide your efforts will create an impact.

Similarly, Howard University, along with all HBCUs, has worked hard to take a leading role in advocating for more diversity in our health care workforce. The demographics of the population in country today are quickly changing, reflecting our country's our growing diversity. The U.S. Census estimates that by 2044, more than half of the U.S. population will belong to a "minority" group. As Howard University graduates, this is clearly an area where you can drive positive change. You are essential players within the changing face of health care in America. Right now, only about 6% of practicing physicians, 6% of dentists, and 9% of nurses are African American, Latino, or Native American. This disparity cannot continue if we hope to increase health care equity. As graduates of the fifth oldest dental school in the United States, every Howard dental graduate here today is well-positioned to promote a more just, productive, and healthier country.

The third opportunity for positive change involves advancing collaborative and compassionate care. Oral health is clearly linked to overall health. That's why it is vital to have collaborative, integrated care teams focused on wellness and prevention, on increasing health literacy, and on promoting health equity.

As a Howard dental graduate, you also are able to deliver care with compassion. Health care is based on science, but it is really all about people. It is about understanding the uncertainty and fear that a patient may feel and offering that patient honesty and respect. It is about earning a patient's trust and confidence in your experience and your ability.

I had successful back surgery three years ago in a small hospital in Port Jefferson, New York on Long Island, not at one of the big, famous institutions in New York City, which are excellent, of course. Marion followed with a similar operation recently. But we chose the small institution, known as Mather Hospital, because their providers marry expertise with compassion. Despite the serious procedures we underwent, our experience at Mather was the most satisfying that my wife and I could have imagined.

Remember what the poet Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." More than anything else, your patients will remember how you made them feel, so make every interaction count!

I realize that I am asking a lot of you today. At Henry Schein, we will always stand beside you in supporting the contributions you make to society, because we can only tackle difficult challenges by working together and taking one step at a time. To that end, and knowing that "a good example has twice the value of good advice," I want to announce today that Henry Schein wants to help you begin your careers with the means to give back to society. Henry Schein will provide each Howard University College of Dentistry class of 2022 graduate with \$1,000 in

essential supplies to be used towards providing charitable care of your choosing, whether in the United States or abroad.

Additionally, Henry Schein has been pleased to support Howard University's global student outreach program for the past 18 years. This program provides critical care to underserved communities, while instilling a sense of service within our future dental workforce. Today, I am also pleased to announce that Henry Schein will be extending and expanding our support of Howard's student outreach program with a grant of \$100,000 in essential products to be used over the next four years.

And finally, to recognize the important and unique role that our HBCUs play in promoting health equity, Henry Schein will make a further grant of \$100,000 in essential products to support the student outreach program at the only other HBCU dental school in the United States, Meharry Medical College.

As you commence your careers, we are privileged to support the mission work you will do as a Howard dental graduate, as you fulfill the words of Muhammad Ali, who said, "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth."

As Howard dental graduates, each of you here today is qualified to be a great dentist, and you can also travel the road less travelled to be a powerful agent of change by being a courageous leader in the health care profession; in advancing health care equity and access to care; in helping to advance diversity and cultural competency; and in advancing collaborative and compassionate care. It means standing on the platform of success that you celebrate today and accepting new struggles and challenges as you continue to progress in your careers.

At times along the way, it may seem daunting. But if you accept those challenges, if you overcome those struggles as you achieve, then when you get to be my age, you will look back on your life and realize the wisdom of my personal hero, Nelson Mandela, who said, "It always seems impossible until it's done." Congratulations again and thank you for inviting me to share this very special day with you.

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