Message from the Dean

To our graduates, families, and friends,

Congratulations! On behalf of us all here at the Silberman School of Social Work, I am so extremely proud of the graduating class of 2016. I admire how hard you have worked in your classes; how passionately you have served communities, families, individuals, and our city in your field placements; and how fiercely you have advocated for the most vulnerable populations in our society. I am confident you will carry all you have learned at Silberman into your extraordinary careers as social workers and as leaders.

I felt very proud to share the stage at the Silberman graduation ceremony on June 2 with four remarkable speakers: Keynote speaker Anne Williams-Isom, CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone; alumni speaker and Trailblazer Award Recipient Dr. Martha Adams Sullivan, Executive Director of Gouverneur Health on the Lower East Side; and our two graduating student speakers, Hattie Elmore and Ray Ortiz. I am excited to present their outstanding speeches in this booklet.

I hope that you, like me, will remain inspired by their words, ideas, and calls to action.

Again, my heartfelt congratulations and best of luck to the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College class of 2016!

Mary M. Cavanaugh
Acting Dean
The Lois V. and Samuel J. Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College
Thank you, Dean Cavanaugh and the Silberman faculty for inviting me today. Welcome faculty, family and friends.

Congratulations, Class of 2016! I hope you are all feeling very proud this morning for the hard work that you have done to get yourselves here.

This is actually my second graduation in the past few days. I went to my daughter Ande’s middle-school graduation on Friday. So far today, I’m seeing a lot less selfies and a lot less giggling. Well done, Class of 2016!

First of all, I must say: Welcome to the team! The field of social work, the city and the nation need each and every one of you. Seeing all your beautiful, smiling faces adds to my hope this morning. And I say “adds,” because my message today is why I am – and you should be – full of hope today.

By “hope,” I don’t mean standing out in a thunderstorm and searching for a silver lining. I am talking about the hope – and, frankly, the joy - that grows out of walking in your purpose, the hope that looks into a coming storm and says with resolve, “I can weather this.” The hope that keeps us going because we know that we can make a difference in someone’s life where others only see failure and despair.

That is why I am so blessed that who I am and what I do for a living are the same thing. I work in a place where social workers are critical to the core of what we do for the 13,000 children and 13,000 adults that we serve in 97 blocks in Harlem. There are also hundreds of thousands of children and families across the nation who need someone who is trained and dedicated to partnering with them to heal their lives. Someone like you.

I was particularly excited to be invited to talk to you today. First, because even though I was trained as a lawyer, I have always been a social worker “wannabe.”

Secondly, because the commencement at a social work school is like no other.
That’s because you are all here for one reason and one reason alone: because you want to put yourselves directly into the heart of people’s lives for the sole reason of helping them to understand themselves, to accept what they cannot change and make adjustments where adjustments are due so they can live more fulfilled lives.

It is the ultimate selfless career: there are no social workers breaking the internet or trending on Twitter. Sorry about that. You are not in this for the glory, but rather for the quiet victory – the joy that you experience, the goodness that is brought into the world when the people you work with take a step toward success when they previously felt like they were drowning in failure.

The roots of my own personal mission to help children, families and community go back to my childhood across the river in Queens. Both my mother and father were immigrants to the United States from the small Caribbean island of Trinidad and Tobago. Through education and hard work, my mom became a registered nurse and my dad drove a taxi. They were able to provide a modest home for me and my siblings, which included sending us to the local Catholic school. I would say we were solidly lower middle class.

In our neighborhood, like many neighborhoods today across our City, there was a bit of a socio-economic dividing line though.

Across the street from where we lived were families who struggled even more than us. Where no adult was working and where the children had to attend the local public schools, which were not good at all.

I can remember so vividly, even though it was over 40 years ago, recognizing the differences between my friends who lived across the street and those families who had somewhat more stable backgrounds.

When I was very young, a boy from the neighborhood died after falling down the shaft of an elevator that had been broken for weeks. His tragic, avoidable death solidified the feeling I had in my very young mind that the lives of my neighbors were less valued by society. I guess that was my first taste of the world confirming for me that poor Black lives did not matter.

Unfortunately it is still true today that the ZIP code you are born into can determine your future opportunities.

Always the community organizer, I sometimes gathered friends to put on plays in front of my house for the adults in the neighborhood. And I saw how families on both sides of the
street drew strength from each other and how everyone wanted the same things for their children: happiness, safety and a secure future.

And while all of this was going on outside of my home, inside of my home the walls were falling down. My mom, my brothers and I were being terrorized by domestic violence. No one knew for a long while, but it was a neighbor who eventually called the police, and it was another concerned neighbor who one time came into a scene of scared and crying children and ushered my father outside to get him to cool down. And eventually to not return.

Today scientists call this ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences. I did not have to read about it. I lived it. ACEs are the effects of chronic stress during the first years of a child’s life. Whether it’s domestic violence, substance abuse or homelessness, ongoing stress within the family can make children more susceptible to conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and learning disabilities for years to come. But the science also clearly shows that these circumstances can be mitigated by parents engaging their children in positive communications – simply talking with them or even singing.

That makes the work that social worker and health providers do even more important for helping generations of children literally have healthier lives. That is the work you all will be doing, Class of 2016.

These early experiences – and my mother’s strength and resilience – inspired me to become a lifelong advocate for under-served children and families.

We each have a story. Each of you here today have a moment when you decided that this was going to be the field you chose. In my case, I say the field chose me. Because for many of us, what drives us is not the money that we think we will make in this career (I hope you did not pick this for the money), but because of an unrelenting drive we have to bring about change and social justice for all people. Not just for some or a privileged few, but for all - simply because we think it is right and just.

You will find yourself in places throughout your career where you will not even realize that you are the one that will be the seeker of justice - the change agent that an organization, a community or a family needs. You will look around and expect someone else to step up. But I am telling you today, Class of 2016, it will be you that they will need to step up and take a stand.

In my 13 years at the City Administration for Children's Services, I saw firsthand the shortcomings of a child welfare system whose response to fragile families was all too often to take children away from them and put them in foster care.
Now don’t get me wrong. I loved my years at ACS, and I saw them do a lot of good when people had the right resources - when families and communities are supported before a crisis occurs, and when the dedicated, caring staff of ACS gets the training and support that they need. But that does not occur if folks like you do not advocate for that from outside and within the organization.

Many of you will find yourselves working in government or at a nonprofit and I want you to remember to not just think about what you are going to get out of the organization or job, but about what is the legacy that you want to leave them. Because when you are truly walking in your purpose, you are compelled to share your gifts, and to influence and change the people around you. Your presence matters. In every encounter, in every meeting, in every moment large and small, you are making a difference.

Remember you walk with your light all of the time, it is not something that you bring out every now and then, or that you turn on or off. People see your light all of the time. It is always there, and when your light shines, it helps to illuminate the paths of those around you.

Having worked with vulnerable families on a large scale at both the Harlem Children’s Zone and ACS, I can tell you this is a promising time to be in the social work field.

Today, the nine-year-old girl who used to direct neighborhood plays in Springfield Gardens is now directing a troupe of incredibly dedicated social workers, teachers and other professionals. We are showing the nation how taking a comprehensive approach to youth, family and community development can break the cycle of generational poverty at an unprecedented scale.

This work has never been about just one thing. Not about helping one family, or creating one good school or strengthening one community. It has always been about what we need to do as a nation in order to save our very soul.

Yes, I understand that social services are still starved for funding – every program is under the budget microscope. But the cost of doing business as usual is even higher. In New York City, it costs $168,000 a year to keep someone in prison.

We know today that there are affordable, sustainable solutions. And we know that if we have the political will and the right practitioners - that would be you, Class of 2016 - we can get this done together.

For example, in a few days, about 60 blocks from here, our Harlem Children’s Zone
Promise Academy charter school will have its third high-school graduation and 100% of those beautiful students have been accepted to college. This year we will have more than 100 college graduates prepared to enter the work force.

And that is in a community where kids are challenged on all fronts – from failing schools to insecure living situations to inadequate health care. Where 65 percent of the children are born into poverty, where 30 percent of our teens have had a family member killed by violence.

This kind is success proves once again that it isn’t the kids that are the problem or the families or the community. This work is only possible because of the team that is out in the field now: the social workers, the educators and the health professionals like you who have a bold vision of what is possible and who are waiting for the next wave of troops to join them. That is you, Class of 2016.

You will help us to lead the way. You will let the nation know what is possible for children, families and communities when we take our best and brightest and unleash them to do what they do best - and when you give families what they need to support themselves. You, Class of 2016, will make sure that resources are allocated to reflect that, that resources match who we say we want to be as a nation, and that the American dream is available to all of us.

That is what my Mom did for us. Through education, community supports and her neighbors, she was able to lift her children out of poverty. Now, the possibilities for her grandchildren are only limited by their imagination. That is what the American dream truly is all about.

Yes, the work you will all do is difficult work and you will have your setbacks, but you must believe as Thomas Edison once said: “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

Then there is the best news of all. That is that the Silberman School of Social Work Class of 2016 is coming to join the fight.

You bring all that you have learned, your vibrant energy and your powerful determination to the field. Your fresh perspective and bold new ideas will refresh us all. I know that if you turn on the news these days it sometimes looks like America is losing its way, but for me, each of you is another reason for hope.

Let me conclude by adding a bit more to all you have learned here at Hunter, something I have learned from many years in the field - and as a woman, a woman of color, a mother
of three and a wife of 24 years.

First and foremost, you must remember to take care of yourself in the years ahead. You cannot be a healer if you are not being healed. You cannot be a healer if you are run down, and you cannot help to fill up someone else’s cup if your cup is empty.

No matter how well-intentioned you are, you will hit the wall like even the strongest marathon runner. Social work can be frustrating and emotionally draining. Therefore you need to replenish before you hit the wall.

Lean on each other, use the strength and love of those around you to sustain you. I promise you it works. I promise you it is as important as anything you have learned here, and I promise you that you will want to push it to the side and that is a losing strategy.

And speaking of those around you: Are there any parents and family members of our graduates here today?

Graduates, these are your secret energy source. Don’t be too proud to tap into their love for you as a source of strength. They, like me, are so proud of you today (so remember to remind them of that often).

Find other things you can do for yourself to maintain your inner strength. For me it is yoga, running, being with my kids and relying on the comfort that my faith gives me.

Allow me to end with the words of the ancient Greek scientist Archimedes, who once said, “Give me a place to stand and a lever long enough and I can move the world.”

Today, Class of 2016, you have arrived at that firm place to stand. Now you can leverage all that you have learned. Go out and move the world.

Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this very special day.
Dean Cavanaugh,
Esteemed Faculty,

Thank you.

I gladly accept this recognition – first, thanking God for the opportunity to serve, and also in honor and memory of my parents, Leon and Lillie, who encouraged and supported me, as the first college graduate in my extended family.

I also want to thank my family who are present here today: my husband, Jamal, and my son Malik – also a Hunter alum. I would not be here were it not for your support. And friends, life-long friends from graduate school: Professor Robyn Brown-Manning, Ph.D., and Symra D. Brandon, former Councilmember, City of Yonkers, New York – we continue to be a support to each other.

To the graduates, Congratulations!

I recall vividly sitting where you are today. Were I told then, that I’d be standing here today – I probably would have said, “Oh no, not me.” But, it is my hope that my being here today prompts you to say, “Yes that will be me some day. I will join the faculty. I will be acknowledged for the work I will do.”

You are very fortunate, blessed, to have been trained to be experts in helping others directly – or, as administrators, creating the conditions for others to help. You know how to be helpful to people who feel they can’t help themselves or don’t know where to turn. And your skills are greatly needed, because you’ve been trained to value justice and equity, recognizing that oppression and injustice impact some groups disproportionately.

You are also fortunate to have been taught at a school whose mission is so congruent with that of our profession. No doubt, many of you are also the first in your families to achieve a graduate degree.
Just a few words of advice for the graduates as you commence your work as professional social workers:

- Be mindful to move into your jobs like the experts you’ve been trained to be.

- Keep learning – that’s what experts do. We live in a fast-changing world with new problems requiring new solutions. When I sat where you are, there was no AIDS and there were only two homeless shelters in New York City - one for men and one for women. Most New Yorkers didn’t even know where those shelters were located. Of course, we couldn’t even have imagined the September 11th attack.

- Always place clients’ needs first – the rest will come.

- Don’t let others erase you or your profession. Represent yourself as a social worker – no matter your field or modality of practice. And, represent social work well. When necessary, defend your profession.

- Do so by staying involved with the profession through membership in our professional association and in the Alumni Association.

In closing, I want to again thank the school, my professional family, for always being there for me. I’ve called on so many of you throughout my career – thanks for always saying “Yes.” I feel that we’ve traveled the road together.

I’m fond of saying that becoming a professional social worker is one of the best life decisions I’ve made.

Although I’m far from being done yet – just the same, I’m passing the baton to all of you!

Thank you!
Congratulations, Class of 2016!!! My fellow Social Workers: Let me first start off by saying how freaking excited, proud, but most of all in awe I am at each and every one of us! For some of us, this is “what we do.” For others, it was an eye-opener during an internship experience [that made us choose social work]. And then we have those of you [who were not working in social work], who realized your skills could be better used in a different capacity. Either way, we’ve learned a lot about ourselves through this process.

There were moments of joy, when you came across a professor who challenged you and yet you made it through – Dr. Aymer and Professor Bojana… – no shade, Dr. Aymer! There was sadness, when you received back a paper that you had to redo, yet you finally turned it in and received credit! Or terror, when you expected to see your grades posted but saw nothing when you checked CUNY First for the fiftieth time. However, through it all, here we are.

To our families and loved ones who took this journey alongside us, we thank you!! I am sure many of us could not have made it without our loved ones. For that, I give a special shout-out to my husband and daughters. Elmores, you rock!

Some of us are entering a world that is bound to come with stressors; and others are moving up in their already stressful environments. Let me just say, it is worth it! You would not be in the world of ‘human services’ if you were not selfless, and up for the challenge to put others first and assist in their growth. We spoke a lot about self-care over the past two years in school. Let me say that we partook in self-care for two years. We thought enough about ourselves, futures, families, and our people to take two years of our lives to master what it takes to be an effective social worker. Yes! Those late nights; the extra ten or twenty pounds (well, for me about thirty pounds) that we’ve gained in the process; missing moments with our children and loved ones; not making those social events; even the stress and anxiety that crept up on us – was all worth it! In the midst of all of that, we took care of ourselves and accomplished something no one can take away from us.
I am proud to say that I not only do social work but I am a social worker.

Growing up and becoming a successful career-woman were my dreams and goals. (Thank you, Mommy and Daddy, for supporting my dreams!) Fighting for social justice in an unjust world became my passion. Now I stand here before you feeling extremely blessed and humbled to say, I am living my dream and basking in this surreal moment. I am truly grateful not only for my experiences and struggles within this profession but also for each and every one of yours as well.

Nothing about this work is easy, except for the genuine love, fight, passion and diligence we put forth in our everyday work.

Before I close, I would like to say that for the first time in my college experience, I made lifetime friends (Kathleen, Thomas, Ashley, Ana, Debbie, and Angie!). As a CUNY baby, born and raised in New York, I know [some of you] don’t always get to experience the “college life” that people talk about because you’re busy living your life. A big part of this journey was building relationships to help carry us through. I’ve learned so much from my classmates and built true friendships that will last a lifetime.

- May we all take this journey and meet our own expectations, and then exceed them above our wildest dreams.
- May what we do be meaningful and effective to the lives of those we come across.
- Most of all, may we always find peace and joy in what we do.

Once again my sisters and brothers, fellow social workers, and friends: Congratulations, and may your light shine wherever you may go in this journey of social work!!!
Good Morning esteemed faculty, family members, friends, and, of course, my fellow graduates. When I saw that there was an opportunity to speak at Graduation, I racked my mind to think of how I would structure a few minutes in which I could reach out to everyone in this room, as there are so many people here from different backgrounds, races, and ethnicities. And the more I thought about it, it became obvious that the one thing that connects us is a desire to help; to cause change; and to do work that [assists] those who need an [extra] hand.

I am grateful for the platform I have been given, and I hope this speech has that one thing that you can take away and use in your life – because our education did not end with that final paper, or that final class, but is a constant learning curve that you must rise over to be able to help whatever population you find yourself serving.

Now, some of you might be wondering, “who is this guy and why is he up here talking to us?” So, a bit about myself. I was born and raised in the housing projects of New York, instilled with a very strong work ethic, something I learned from watching my mother work twelve to thirteen hours a day so she could put food on our table and pay our rent and bills. As a first generation American born to immigrants from the Dominican Republic, when I got the opportunity to enter college I was pushed into becoming a business major – by my family, and from an inner need to make money so I would never have to go back to being as poor as I was when I grew up.

At the time, I thought I was poor because I did not have much. But as I got older, I learned that I was poor because I desired more than what I had.

A few years ago, I began to research social work master’s programs, and I applied to the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College. At the time, I did not know what it would mean to work forty-plus hours a week, supervise three programs, and go to school full time. As anxious as I was, I can confidently say this now: It was one of the best decisions I have ever made, as today I attain a degree that I will be using not just for the rest of my career, but for the rest of my life.
What I have learned is, it’s not that my pockets were empty; it was the emptiness in my spirit that gave me the strength to continue pushing forward and feeding the void I felt.

Going to school was the first step in shaping my character, but it was the actual field of social work that helped me empower, and holistically feed, the soul of the man I was going to be. The profession has tested me, molded me, and created the man I am today.

Now, we all have our reasons for choosing this profession, and mine stems from being a product of my environment. During my first Silberman social policy class, we had a conversation around the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, Missouri, which brought up some issues that I had never really faced before. Fifteen years prior, in 1999, I remember being a 16-year-old kid watching the news being reported on the shooting of Amadou Diallo. Back then, I couldn’t really process what had happened – a Black man had taken out his wallet, it was mistaken for a gun, and he was shot forty-one times by the police. For a long time after that, my mom began to tell me to be careful when I left the house and to always be mindful around the police.

My high school didn’t talk about this. There was no Facebook, no social media outlets where I could voice my feelings, or find others with the same anxiety. So I remember growing resentment, because I could not understand why this would happen. As a result, I was scared! I started to pay more attention to the police when they were around me. I remember going to the hardware store and buying a see-through plastic holder for my train and bus pass, and I made sure to keep the dollar or two that my mom could spare in my front pockets. I made sure to be aware so that I would not be the next person on the news. But, seventeen years later, I’m amazed that men of color still have to be “careful” because of who we are and what we look like.

We live in a society where, one second, big Black and Hispanic men are praised for being great basketball & baseball players, but then that same demographic is daily overrepresented as dangerous criminals on the news. These images, seen locally and nationally in the media, have fed people’s implicit and explicit biases, my own internalized racism, and conditioned me to be conscious of how my skin color and large frame might negatively affect someone’s sense of safety.

Nonetheless, I am now in a position where I am tired of being “careful,” tired of feeling self conscious that wearing a hoodie or fitted hat might make me a threat; and I don’t want another fifteen years to pass by and find myself in a situation where I am telling my children to make sure to be “careful” just because of what they look like. The conversation needs to be changed, to highlight people of color as advocates, politicians, fathers, mothers, teachers – not just the population we are seen as on the news. It shows how
much work the field of social work has ahead of itself.

Now, with the actual profession, and politics of social work, it is hard! That’s it! There’s no cool or nice way to say it besides it’s just a hard profession to be in. But if your heart is in it, it is also very rewarding! I am in this field not because this is what I “want to do,” but because as an individual, it’s who I am. I wish I had learned all the struggles of this profession in school, but sadly, in social work, it is going to be a lot of learning on the job – as the passions of helping others, self-care, dealing with difficult people, and dealing with difficult and corrupt systems, are not things that can easily be captured and taught in a classroom.

So my final thoughts would be: as social workers, “practice what you preach!” A lot of people do not see the correlation between what they practice at work and how they use it in real life. But if you really looked at the advice you give clients – small steps, small goals, teaching them to work the system that is available to everyone – and if we all applied that to our daily lives, we would all be more focused, more driven, and able to directly affect those barriers that have been in our way.

We already disseminate our knowledge to others, and we deserve to treat ourselves with the same words of empowerment that we use to motivate those we serve.

Being in this field of social work; working as a supervisor; being able to help those who are in need, and to daily empower my staff and clients to help themselves so they can help others, I am grateful to be in a profession where I get paid just to be myself. Because challenging, advocating, and helping others is what makes me who I am. I am, and will always be, a man who wants to change the world, to help those who cannot help themselves. I challenge all of you to look within, and really get in touch with that inner advocate. Educate them, teach them patience, and change will come with the experience you gain. THANK YOU!