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## **Star's advice to Montclair State grads: Live with grace, and with feeling**

S. Epatha Merkerson, a star of the hit television crime show *Law & Order*, told Montclair State University graduates Friday that she hoped they would embrace life with the joy, grit and curiosity of her mother, who went skydiving last year at the age of 85.

The award-winning actress, known for her 16-year role as Lt. Anita Van Buren, said that she watched from the ground last June as her mother jumped from a plane and came spiraling down to earth beneath a parachute. "As she descended," Merkerson recalled, "the look on her face was pure grace."

Not to be outdone, the 60-year-old actress figured she had better try skydiving, too. When she was falling through the air, she kept telling herself to "Keep your eyes open, don't miss a thing."

That was her message to the Class of 2013: "Start paying attention and jump out of that plane ... That's what I wish for you, that you end up walking through this life smelling the smells, looking at other cultures, talking to people next to you, making yourself available, listening when someone is offering, and taking it all in with what I saw in my mother's face. I wish you a life filled with grace."

Merkerson said she was speaking extemporaneously from the heart because she left her speech in her suitcase by mistake, but added "If I get teary, it's because I'm deep in menopause."

At one point Merkerson, who was granted an honorary doctor of letters degree, asked her mother to stand up in the audience. The crowd roared for this tidy, smiling woman in an elegant silvery-teal suit and high heels. "Here is a woman," Merkerson said, "who raised five children alone, all college graduates, at a time when people said it was impossible."

The university's commencement ceremony at the Izod Center in East Rutherford granted degrees to 4,320 graduates, the largest class since the first group of 45 to finish in 1910.

Two student speakers carried on this theme of determined black women transcending hurdles. Mame Kani Diop talked of coming to America from a patriarchal home in Senegal, where she was scorned for hoping to get an education. Critics told her that as a mother, her only role was home cooking and caring for her children, and nobody would understand her English anyway.

At times she doubted herself, but forged ahead and earned a master's degree in family and child studies. She also helped provide support for survivors of torture, worked as a counselor in Jersey

City and wrote a book called "Eye on Africa" to dispel misconceptions about its cultures. She plans to pursue a PhD at Montclair State in family studies. The school "taught me I don't have to wait for my children to fulfill my dreams, because I could achieve them myself," she said.

Racquel E. Foster of Springfield spoke on behalf of undergraduates. A Jamaican immigrant, she quit a full-time job at 41 to finish her bachelor's degree. She just accepted a job as a news assistant with the Fox 5 broadcasting network in New York. "I'm proof that no matter how long it may take, or what obstacles you may face, you can accomplish any dreams you set for yourself," she said.

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