

Commencement Address

Delivered by Rosa Louise Parks

“Mother of the Modern Day Civil Rights Movement”

May 20, 1989

Thank you so very much, President Stein, for that wonderful Introduction, and to the Board of Control, faculty, friends, parents, and graduates of this great Michigan Technological University. I'm very happy to be here. It's a real honor for me to be here with you today for my first visit in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I've enjoyed my stay here so far and look forward to a very, very pleasant visit with you.

As I look over this beautiful crowd and see the accomplishments that you have made and the great things for the future for this university and for our country, I certainly am a long, long way from the rural part of Alabama where I was born. My age is now 76, and I was born in Alabama during a very, very severe time for us shortly after World War I. Black soldiers had given their lives to save America as free from war and then, of course, were met with many other reprisals and actions from the Klan and further racial segregation that was legally enforced. The same thing occurred after World War II. Blacks have made a great contribution to this country. It is just up to the majority the leaders and the government officials-to realize that we, too, are human beings and that we have made contributions and we have far more potential than has been shown, if we but have the opportunity to exercise the ability and fulfill our accomplishments as American citizens and as human beings and people of real self-worth.

We've had a beautiful program and enjoy the great talents that you have here. And as we move into the nineties away from 1989, it is up to us to first rid our own minds and hearts from prejudice-toward other people because of race, creed, color or religion-and to look at every human being as a person of worth, regardless of how they may appear to you. And we should think in terms of what can be and should be and will be developed into a world of peace, prosperity, and success.

We are born without prejudice. It has to be learned and has to be taught from those around us. And unless we as a people, united, face this challenge and face this problem as it comes upon us, we will not be able to fulfill our own potential. As it has been said, I think Booker Washington said, "You cannot keep a man down in a ditch unless you stay with him." And I feel that if we have an open mind, a heart full of love, and a strong determination and courage to face obstacles as we meet them, that we, as a great nation, can realize our potential and bring about the beloved community that was so often mentioned by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

He did strive for peace and love. Of course, he lost his life because of some person or persons who felt he was doing harm rather than good. But he never meant anyone harm, and I am very grieved-I was very grieved-at losing such leadership. We lost many people in our community and in our country who were potential leaders and were cut down short, and I'm hoping that as we go from this place, that all of us, each and every one of us, will look within ourselves and continue to eradicate the last vestiges of prejudice and ideas of racial superiority.

This is a great place for technological advancement, but we do need to go back to what we've always thought of as the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." I also feel that if we would think in terms of giving our very best-every day of our lives-of what we can do to make the world a better place to live, that we will be moving forward to the great future.

I have, in my last years of retirement from employment, established a program for helping young people to develop themselves and reach their highest potential. I have many things in my mind, and I am hopeful that they will take root someplace among others as I pass off the scene.

I'm very grateful to one young woman, Mrs. Elaine Steele, who encourages me to not give up and to not think of myself as being too old to move around. I owe her very much. She is my right hand and my dear friend. And I've met so many other fine people. I've met people even here that I have known before.

And as I move about and try to work for peace, harmony, and a world of justice and good will, I am hoping and praying that all of you will continue, as you see fit, to build this world. It is a great and almost formidable task, but we in this modern time are equal to it. And if I feel that I can and will at my time of life try my very best, then you can look within yourselves. And with the knowledge that you have and the ability and opportunities that you have, you will make the very best of them and go on to make the world what it should be. We should never give up, never give out, and continue as we make a great quest for a full and complete future as we face the next century.

Thank you!