Education is a key that opens doors to opportunities.

By Sarah Obed

Remarks to the Graduating Doyon Foundation Recipients

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Today you have not earned your key, you keys were earned by the sweat of your brow, at that midnight hour when you were studying for that econ test, or putting the finishing touches on your glorious paper on philosophy, education, or culture. Your keys were earned every time you finished a class... when you took the opportunity to breathe a sigh of relief before digging your heals in again for the next class. Every time you tried to untangle the confusion in your mind over calculus, or understand the complexities of history, you were one step closer to today.

You have not earned your keys today... instead, today is the culmination of so many small steps towards this, your bigger goal. The goal of the completion of your degree... and so instead... today is a celebration... a celebration of accomplishment. Today we are celebrating you, your accomplishments, your achievements, and yes... your opportunities for the future.

You see, the Native community beams with gladness with every Native graduate. Because you carry forward the hope of the Native community. In the completion of your studies, we recognize in you your potential to continue doing great things. And we need you to succeed... because in you, we have so much hope... you are the ones carrying forward our prayers for the future.

Let me stop here, and say a little bit of the opportunities that lay before you.

Maybe you are not done yet. I so clearly remember, shortly after I graduated with my Bachelors Degree, my Auntie Anna Frank stopped me and told me I was not done. “I want you to go all the way.” All the way? I asked... and she said “ALL the way.” And so I thought of her last spring when I completed my Master’s Degree in Public Policy... and I still don’t feel finished yet.

But I didn’t fall directly back into graduate school... there are other opportunities that education brought me.

Close your eyes a minute. Imagine a rural, remote village... maybe 150 people... mostly elders and children, because the young people have left the village to go to school and get jobs. Imagine that this village is the center of the Native language... because the others who left for work are somewhat disconnected... but here in the village is the stronghold...
Imagine the subsistence living lifestyle... the fish, the vegetables... not needing too much money, because everything you need really, you could get from the land...

Well, except for fuel... those darn fuel costs... which are nothing but a bother when you want to go to town. That made travel to the village so expensive. That made it difficult to develop jobs there in the village.

Imagine now the smell of the village... the fresh ocean breeze, the earthy garden scent of yams and manioc... See the palm trees swaying in the breeze as you bite into a fresh juicy pineapple, while you relax on the sand beach in the shade, just out from the 80 degree heat of the sun.

WHAT? You say? Pineapple? Sand beach? 80 degrees? I know, I know... this village almost sounds like an Alaskan village, but the village I described to you is thousands of miles south of the equator in the Pacific, on a group of islands in Vanuatu. I lived there for two years while I served in the Peace Corps.

You see, the rural villages of Vanuatu face many challenges that our villages face... the need for improvements in health care delivery and education, the stress of urban migration of our young people, and the fear of loss of culture and language.

Back in the 1950s, the Alaska Community Health Aide Program was developed to address tuberculosis and high infant mortality. Health Aides now serve in more than 170 of our Alaskan villages... It is an innovative program that increased access to care and treatment. And if you needed help outside of the village you could be referred to a regional clinic, or the statewide hospital.

And what kind of system do you think the people of Vanuatu use? The community health aide system... It was an innovative program developed to serve the needs of our people, and it is now found across the globe.

You see, today we are celebrating your accomplishments, and your opportunities. Serving in the United States Peace Corps was an opportunity that completing my degree brought me. It may or may not be for you, but my point is this... you will need to find a job... its part of being responsible... find a job you love to do... but know that when you find a job that helps serve the needs of our Alaskan communities... you are potentially helping others across the world. It is no small mission.

But Marianne Williamson said it best, “We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It’s not in some of us; it’s in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.”

And remember, this is the truth. The Native community beams with gladness with every one of you. You carry forward the hope of the Native community. In the completion of your studies, we recognize in you your potential to do great things. In you, we have so much hope... you are the ones carrying forward our prayers for the future.