

Address at the Galen University Graduation Ceremony
Dr. Carla N. Barnett,
Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community

Salutations

It is with deep pride and personal joy that I join you today to celebrate this year's graduating class of Galen University.

I say personal joy because I do not stand before you only as Secretary-General of the Caribbean Community. I stand before you also as a Belizean, someone who knows this country, loves this country, and understands the dreams that are born here.

I know the strength of Belizean families, the sacrifices that parents, grandparents, spouses, siblings, children, friends and communities make so that one person can reach a day like this.

So, Graduates, let me begin by congratulating each of you. Today, we celebrate YOU. We celebrate your discipline, courage, perseverance, the nights when you stayed awake to finish assignments, the mornings when you got up to push on even though you were beyond tired, and the moments when even as you wondered whether you could continue, you summoned the quiet strength to keep going.

Today, when you walked across this stage, you did not walk alone. You walked with your families, who carried you in ways that others may never see; lecturers, who challenged you to think more deeply and differently; and friends, who encouraged you when the road got rough.

You walked with every person who prayed for you, believed in you, made space for you, and reminded you that this day was surely coming.

Today is not only about what you have completed. It is about who you have become and therefore who you are. You are someone who knows how to start something and finish it, who knows what sacrifice feels like, and

someone who understands that achievement is not handed to us. It is built, step by step, decision by decision.

Graduation is often described as the end of one chapter. And yes, one chapter closes today, but a new chapter is beginning.

As I look at you today, I remember what it felt like to be a young university graduate. I still remember the pride in accomplishment, the excitement and hope for the future, and also the uncertainty.

Like you I had ambitions and did not have all the answers. I had dreams, but I did not know where the road ahead would lead. But I knew I had to learn how to make my way in a world that does not always open its doors easily. All I knew when I completed my first degree was that I wanted to be the best professional economist I could be. How that was to happen? Only time could tell. How would I manage to complete the post graduate training that my discipline required?

In my early years of doing economic work at the brand new Central Bank of Belize, the reality was that there was very little economic data to analyze. We had access to financial data, of course, because we were on the ones putting that data together. But production and trade data were not available as timely as was required. So what did we do? We set about building our data bases from the ground up, beginning with trade data, which meant adding up individual import and export transactions and creating a spreadsheet on paper.

This was before there were any computerized systems at ports of entry. This was also before the Statistical Institute of Belize was invented. So we rolled up our sleeves, literally, and did what we had to do to gather the data we needed. Now, with the skills and capabilities in that agency and others, quality data is available in a wide range of economic and social areas as well as in environmental and other areas critical to sustainable development, for those of you who will carry on research on Belize.

I tell this story to emphasize that you must always be prepared to meet challenges that stand in the way of doing your work to the best of your ability and in the way it must be done. Even at this age, whenever the data is not there to inform critical decisions that have to be made, I am willing to do what is needed to get it.

So, I encourage you today: have patience but be prepared to do the work.

This is life; it gives us challenges, but it also gives us sweetness. It gives us difficult mountains to climb, but it also gives us beautiful views.

The lesson is to not avoid challenges. The lesson is to use challenges to create a stronger you.

Know who you are, know your values, your strengths, what you stand for, what you will not compromise, what gives you courage, and what keeps you grounded. Learn the difference between constructive criticism and the voices that seek to make you doubt yourself.

I want to encourage you today not simply to be successful, but to be great. And by greatness, I do not mean fame, position or wealth alone. Those things may come, but true greatness is deeper than recognition.

Be great in your character, discipline, kindness, honesty and in the way you treat people who can do nothing for you. Be great in how you respond when life disappoints you. Be great in how you carry the name of your family, your community, your university, your country and region. True greatness comes from striving for excellence.

The Caribbean needs this kind of greatness. Belize needs this kind of greatness - people who will build strong families, communities, institutions, businesses, systems, and nations.

The challenges we are facing in Belize and the wider Caribbean and Central American region, are growing even as the global systems for cooperation, development and peace building have become increasingly uncertain and unstable, making it even more difficult to address the challenges we face.

Foremost among our challenges is the impact of climate change. As our weather patterns change – not only more and stronger storms, but more instances of drought broken by extremely heavy rains – we face the reality that **we** have to figure out how to build our own resilience. We as small island and low lying coastal developing states cannot stop climate change, because **we** do not cause it. All of us together account for less than 1% of the global emissions that fuel climate change. But we have to figure out

how to live with it and, even more importantly, how to ensure that your generation and the generations to come will survive and prosper. This, in a context in which those who cause climate change are not prepared to take responsibility for it or adequately finance resilience building in small states. **We have a lot of work to do to find our own solutions.**

Across our region we are facing the reality of violent crime devastating our families and communities and destabilizing our economies and societies. Many of our countries have been seeking to halt this tide, with support from international agencies and bilateral partners mainly on the basis of their analyses, but the rise in crime and violence continues. Traditional approaches have not been meeting with success. **Again, we have a lot of work to do to find our own solutions.**

When we were hit by COVID 19 five/six years ago, one early impact on the economy was the disruption of trade flows which jeopardized access to imported commodities, including fuel and food. We are currently seeing trade flows disrupted again by the conflicts in the Middle East, particularly the disruptions in oil supplies. As a result, we are all experiencing increased fuel prices which feed into every sector of our economies. There are lessons from these experiences.

First there is a need to accelerate our transition to renewable energy sources, not as a way of addressing climate change – which as I indicated earlier we do not cause – but as a means of increasing our energy security. **Again, there is a lot of work to be done to find our own solutions.**

Second, we need to reduce reliance on imported food supplies by increasing food production. We have been seeking to do this in CARICOM by prioritizing agricultural development and have been seeing strong growth in food production in our member states, including Belize. The potential for implementing new approaches and technologies to increase production and productivity is there. **Again there is a lot of work to be done to find our own solutions.**

Whatever your discipline or choice of work, these issues form part of the larger context in which you will be contributing to our future.

Some of you will find your success here in Belize, some will work across the Caribbean, and some will carry your talents and ambitions beyond the

shores of our region. Wherever life takes you, carry Belize and the Caribbean with pride.

Never believe that coming from a small country means having a small destiny. Small states have produced some of the world's most powerful thinkers, leaders, scientists, innovators, artists, athletes, and change-makers.

Our size has never been the measure of our potential – just think of Haiti and of Curaçao playing in the current World Cup!

Our Belize is not too small for your dreams not to encompass the globe; nor is Galen University too small to shape leaders of regional and global importance. Absolutely not!

And most importantly, you are not too ordinary to do extraordinary things.

When I think about the future of this region, I do not think only about policies, meetings, institutions, or agreements. I think about people like you. I think about graduates who will enter workplaces, will bring fresh ideas and will innovate life changing strategies. And I want to be clear: you do not have to wait until you have a title to lead. You do not have to wait until you have a big office or public recognition.

Leadership begins in the choices you make every day, how you show up, how you speak, listen, solve problems, work with others, treat those who are vulnerable, and respond to inequity and injustice. And, importantly, how you use your education not only to advance yourself but also to help others move forward.

Your education is not only a personal achievement. It is also a responsibility to your family, your country and our region - Central America and the Caribbean.

The founders of CARICOM understood that our individual countries are stronger when united and work together. They understood that cooperation is not a luxury for small states, but indeed a necessity.

Our leaders understood that the future of Belize is connected to the future of the wider Caribbean and Central America, and that we are strongest when our people see one another as partners in a shared journey.

Graduates, you are entering a world that is changing quickly. Technology is transforming how we live and work. AI is reshaping industries; new skills are being demanded; new careers are being created. The jobs of tomorrow may not look exactly like the jobs of today. But I encourage you not to be afraid of change.

Be willing to learn, unlearn, and learn again. Your degree is not the end of your education; it is the foundation for lifelong growth. The most successful people in the years ahead will be those who remain open to learning, those who can adjust, think critically, combine technical skill with human understanding and use technology. And do not not lose your compassion nor your humanity.

GO forward with courage, lead with integrity, serve with compassion, dream with boldness, and rise with resilience. And may you always remember that the mountain is not there to defeat you or stand in your way. Sometimes, it is there to show you the strength you carry within.

May your lives become a blessing to Belize, to the Caribbean and Central America, and to the world.

Congratulations to the 2026 graduating class of Galen University!

I thank you.