

Sharon Shields Commencement Speech 2025

Dean Benbow, Platform Party, Beloved Faculty Colleagues, Revered Staff, Families and Guests, and Graduates. I am deeply honored to receive the distinction of Distinguished Alumna of Peabody College. Peabody has given me a profound reverence for the values and mission of the college and provided a place for me to live out my life's calling. I am grateful for the 51 years I have called Peabody College home.

And now Graduates.....It seems just like yesterday that I welcomed you to sit at the table of learning and discovery here at Peabody College. We chose you to be a part of our community and you boldly accepted that invitation and pulled up a chair to the table to pursue your academic, personal, and professional dreams. And now, it is an honor and privilege to stand before you today as we both are commencing a new chapter in life. I sat where you are sitting 49 years ago and received my Ph.D. from this College. I know the feelings of pride and hope, and yes maybe a little trepidation, as you embark on new journeys.

So, lets have one last heart to heart talk.

Today I want to leave you with a simple but what I believe is a very powerful thought:

“If you don’t have a seat at the table, then pull up a folding chair”

This quote was spoken by Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, the first Black woman elected to the United States Congress. Her words give us a call to action. It is a mindset that can endure

throughout our lives. It is a way of living in a world that presents us with the opportunity to open doors and build bridges for all of humanity.

So, lets take a moment to reflect:

Life doesn't always invite you in...I know you have been at tables of influence, but we have all been left out at times from places where our voices should have been heard. The table, ... it might have been a boardroom, a brainstorming session, a political forum, or simply a space where decisions are being made that affect your life and the lives of others. Sometimes you will look around and realize there are no open seats, that no one thought to invite you, or worse yet, you were not even thought of at all. In those moments, we all have a choice....we can shrug our shoulders and walk away defeated or we can pull up a folding chair...and sit at the table and contribute. Today, I am challenging you to take action...PULL UP A CHAIR.

Susan B. Anthony proclaimed that:

“We should never experience a season of silence. Don't let your voice be quieted. Deepen your sympathy then convert it to action. Pray every single second of your life, not just on your knees but with your work. Think your best thoughts, speak your best words, do your best work. There is so much yet to be done.” (end quote)

So I urge you, bring your own chair. Show up. Give voice. Refuse to be overlooked. You have been prepared by this college and your life experiences and your passion to be confident and bold

in this world. In my own case, my Peabody education prepared and empowered me to champion women's rights through advocacy for the implementation of Title IX. It empowered me to advocate for children's nutrition and disability rights. It empowered me to advocate for underserved communities in places like the Navajo Reservation and the Dominican Republic. I could have never imagined 49 years ago the opportunities I would be afforded to sit at the tables of decision makers and those who influence them. I have learned to put the common good of society above all else. Peabody College has not prepared you to be another face in the crowd that does not stand up for your convictions as you enter a messy, complicated, and difficult world. Our educational systems, our economy and our environment have never confronted a time of more uncertainty. Vanderbilt and other universities have never faced such a tumultuous time. This very place that has provided you with tools to face the world and its needs, is asking you to go forth and be a critical thinker, to look deeply into your soul, examine your values, and to have the courage and persistence to stay at the tables of uncertainty. You are equipped to ask not only hard questions but better questions that shine light on the interdependence of our society and to find truth and meaning to our existence.

You must overcome unprincipled complacency and have a moral integrity that stands for the common good of all. You must not be neutral on issues that hold the balance of the good of humankind in your hands. In the short term it may mean

sacrifice and risk for those who hold power, but in the long term it makes a meaningful difference for those who most need it.

Eleanor Roosevelt urged us to:

“Cast out fear and face the unknown. Face the unknown with courage and integrity and with a high heart. Believe in your dreams, The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.”

The world needs what you bring to the table. It needs your academic learnings, your creativity and innovation, your ideas and stories, your dreams, your contributions, and most of all your courage. It needs people who are willing to shake things up. The world does not need more people who play it safe. We need people who are not afraid to unfold a metal chair and sit down like they mean it so others can find equity and live out their purpose in this world. We are here most of all to make a difference and be at the table to improve the human condition.

Oh, by the way, once you are at the table ... there will be others standing on the outside of that table....unsure if they belong. I hope you will remember your own feelings of being on the outside, times of seemingly being invisible....slide your chair over, make room, and when necessary, I encourage you to bring extra chairs and to build longer tables.....

Your education gives you privilege in this world.....you are in a position of leadership by the very nature of your educational accomplishments...and George Peabody, the great philanthropist and benefactor of this college stated that because you have learned and enhanced your intellectual,

personal and professional capital...you have a debt to future generations. Leadership isn't complete because you now have a seat to claim...you are called to also make space.

As you and I leave Peabody college and embark on new journeys in this world, never doubt we are this world's hope. We are not alone, there are thousands of alumni that are sitting at tables of influence all over the world. As you and I pick up our chairs, may we find ourselves emboldened to be in spaces that place us in the great gaps of the world's needs and where we find great joy in meeting those needs and making a difference for humanity.

I'll look forward to continuing to carry my chair along with each of you into new placesas we keep our feet planted in reality, as we strive to bring a moral compass to guide our actions as agents of change, as we strive to make meaning of this life's existence let's never let fear silence us but lets commit to always keeping our hearts in hope. Let us trust the path, and live the journey that is before us with boldness, integrity, compassion and a good heart....

This world needs all of us.....I have a small gift to celebrate each of you so you will remember this day and the call to action....so pick up your chair....the tables are waiting for us.

Congratulations and blessings.