

Commencement Message to Class of 2026 at UMM

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by

Donna Loring

Good morning, President Ferrini-Mundy, Dean Walsh, faculty, families, and graduates of the University of Maine at Machias, Happy Mother's Day!

It is an honor to stand before you today on behalf of the University of Maine System Board of Trustees.

Before I begin, I want to take a moment to acknowledge someone whose leadership made my presence here possible, former Passamaquoddy Tribal Representative Rena Newell. The Honorable Rena Newell sponsored the legislation that created a seat on the Board of Trustees to represent the Wabanaki Tribes. Because of her vision and her persistence, I stand here today. That matters not just to me, but to the future of this institution and to the relationship between the University and the Wabanaki people.

Today is a day of celebration of hard work, perseverance, and the quiet determination that brought each of you to this moment.

And yet, we gather at a time in our country and in our world that is anything but simple.

You are graduating into uncertainty. Into a time when truth is debated, when communities feel divided, and when the future can feel as fragile as it is full of possibility. You have lived through years that tested your patience, your resilience, and your sense of direction. And still, you are here.

That matters.

Because what this moment asks of you is not perfection. It asks for courage.

Courage to listen when it would be easier to turn away.

Courage to stand up when silence feels safer.

Courage to build something better, even when the path forward is not clearly marked.

Here at Machias, you have learned more than what was written in your textbooks. You have learned what it means to live in community. In a place like this where the land meets the ocean you learn something deeper: that life moves in cycles, and that even in the hardest times, renewal is always possible.

Most of you will go out into communities that are different from one another. Some of you will stay here in Maine. Some will travel far beyond it. But wherever you go, you carry something with you from this place.

You carry the responsibility to care for one another.
You carry the responsibility to tell the truth.
And you carry the responsibility to leave things better than you found them.

That is not always easy work. But it is necessary work.

And I want to say this clearly: you do not have to do it alone.

Lean on each other. Learn from those who are different from you. Be willing not just to speak but to listen. That is where real understanding begins.

As a Penobscot woman, I was taught that we are not separate from the world around us we are part of it. We are connected to the land, to each other, and to the generations who came before us, and those who will come after. That understanding brings both humility and responsibility.

Today, you step into that responsibility.

But you also step into possibility.

Because despite everything we see around us, I remain hopeful. I have seen what people can do when they come together with purpose. I have seen change that once seemed impossible become real.

And now, I see that same potential sitting right here in front of me.

I will leave you with this:

“Here’s to those who see the world differently—the ones who challenge, who question, who refuse to accept things as they are. Because those are the people who change the world.”

Let’s Change the World!

Congratulations, Class of 2026.

Thank you.