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John Bradford Hicks
Secretary of The Board of Trustees and Executive Assistant to the Chancellor

MEMORANDUM

To: Elected Members of the Board of Trustees

From: John B. Hicks

Date: August 15, 2000

Subject: UA Commencement Address

Vivian Malone Jones gave an excellent Commencement address Saturday at The University of Alabama. Trustee Cleo Thomas asked that we obtain a transcript of her speech for you. Mrs. Jones' speech is enclosed. I believe you will see how impactful her remarks were and how enthusiastically they were received by the graduates and their families.

vw

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"Commencement Address: The University of Alabama"

Vivian Malone Jones

August 12, 2000

President Sorensen, members of the Board of Trustees, graduates of the new millenium, families and friends--Lord, what a difference thirty-five years make! For one thing, this exercise is "in-doors" and air-conditioned. When I graduated in 1965, we assembled in Denny stadium. It hadn't yet been named Bryant-Denny, although the legendary coach would notch his 3rd National Championship that fall. Joe Namath was my quarterback.

But the differences between then and now were more striking than where commencement was held. Thirty-five years ago, by attending The University of Alabama, I had the privilege of representing all those who fought for simple justice. The simple

act of walking through a schoolhouse door that had been barred to me, and all people of my color, by the governor of this state—that simple act represented an end to legal segregation in the American South. On that eventful day, Alabama became the last state in the union to yield to the force of law and the weight of conscience. Segregation as it had come to be ratified in *Plessy vs. Ferguson* and passed on in the Alabama Constitution of 1901, (which, by the way, still governs this state), that form of segregation officially ended on a hot June day in 1963.

It was more than a hot day, it was a dangerous day. Although every precaution had been taken by state and federal authorities and by University officials to assure my safety and that of James Hood, no one knew for sure what might happen. The demonstrations in Birmingham, accompanied by fire-hoses, police dogs, bombings and a police riot, had just ended. Later in September four little girls would die in the dynamiting of the 16th

Street Baptist Church. The President of the United States would be assassinated on November 22. And less than twelve hours after I walked into Foster Auditorium to begin my days as a student here, Medgar Evars was shot dead from ambush in nearby Jackson, Mississippi.

Under those circumstances, I could not help but be mindful of the sacrifices made by many to make that day possible—the lives and careers of Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall, who with Constance Motley, Arthur Shores, Fred Gray and others opened the legal door; the courage of John Lewis, Robert Moses and all the children of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee who took the blows and kept their eyes on the prize; the lives of Phyllis Wheatley, Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Dubois and so many others who lit the lamp of freedom that would be tended by Fannie Lou Hammer and all the heroes of Mississippi's Freedom Summer; white

southerners, too, those who spoke against the evil of their day at considerable risk, Clifford and Virginia Durr, Judge Frank M. Johnson, Charles Morgan, Carl Elliot and Hugo Black come to mind--like me, they were University of Alabama graduates, and all played a role in my being at the schoolhouse door on June 11, 1963.

But I would be remiss and indeed wrong if I did not point to those close at hand, certainly my family, but also the people of the Tuscaloosa community who rallied to my side. I could not have done what I did without Stillman College and the people of Tuscaloosa's West End. They provided my safe haven. And I often think of what they did for Autherine Lucy, that brave and courageous woman, who first opened the door of this University in 1956 only to have it slammed in her face by a howling mob that the University did not, perhaps could not, stand up to. She fled to safety in the same community that would put its arms around me.

Of course, to mention names risks leaving out so many of equal importance to my well-being, but for reasons you'll understand, I must mention one Stillman student, Mack Jones. And if you haven't figured it out yet, my last name and his are the same. My escort and I would later marry, have two wonderful children, while he finished his medical education at Emory, and I started my career. Mack would be here today but is recovering from kidney transplant surgery--yet another miracle of the last thirty-five years.

But as glorious and joyous as this day is, I must confess that my affection for the University did not develop immediately. My two years on campus were lonely, despite the self-conscious and understandably awkward efforts of some fellow students to reach out. I also remember fondly and warmly administrators and

faculty who went out of their way to ease my stay. Dean Sarah Healy and Professor Miriam Locke were loving and caring and constant in their support of me. Still, when I graduated, I could not help but be mindful that only a handful of African-American students followed me and that no business in Alabama recruited me or offered me a job as they did my classmates. So I had to leave the state to find a career.

My feelings have changed through the years, as I have watched the University push forward in the enrollment and graduation of African-American students, to the point that today it is a national leader among doctoral degree granting institutions. I have admired even more the University's awareness that it is not where it needs and wants to be on the issues that vitally affect the people of this state, especially its African-American population. But I have confidence today, that I could not have had years ago, that it will succeed. I have happily worked with the Black Faculty

and Staff Association and am proud to have a scholarship named for me. I am also proud of the portrait of me in Bidgood Hall but even prouder of Autherine Lucy's portrait that hangs in the Ferguson Center and that of Arthur Shores in the Library. These and other icons of African-American heritage and accomplishment make this a friendlier and more inspiring campus.

If there is any lesson for the graduates to take from my experience, it is that you must always be ready to seize the moment. When I arrived here on June 11, 1963, years of preparation had gone into making it happen. I had been active in my own community's efforts to end segregation. I had been inspired by the personal courage of people like John LeFlore, head of the NAACP in Mobile, and I had applied for admission to the Mobile branch of the University of Alabama, only to be turned away. I then studied for two years at Alabama A&M, before answering the call that would lead me to the schoolhouse door at

this University, where, two years later, I would become its first African-American graduate—yes, in those days, one could still graduate in four years.

My point is that turning points in personal lives and those of communities come through preparation. I often think of the courage of Rosa Parks. The basic outline of her story is well known, at least as it relates to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. But this was more than a tired seamstress, happening on a given day (December 1, 1955) to give up a seat on a bus. The measure of her courage was that she had prepared for that moment. She was active in the NAACP. She had attended workshops and training sessions. She **knew** the cost of her courage. She **knew** the danger involved, but she did it anyway, because she was prepared for the moment. It wasn't some accident we celebrate in her life, but a life made ready by quiet determination and preparation.

Don't mistake me. Rosa Parks did not know that her day would be December 1, 1955, any more than I knew mine would be June 11, 1963, BUT SHE WAS READY.

AND SO MUST YOU. You may not live in a time of great social change as I did, but you will just as certainly face moral choices. There will come a day in your life when you must act for others—your family, perhaps your community—and you must be ready. What you have done to reach this milestone today is part of that preparation. So take from all the books you have read, all the lessons you have learned, the certain knowledge that one day, any day, you must be bold, have courage, and walk through a door that leads to opportunity for others.