

50TH REUNION CLASS MESSAGE TO THE CLASS OF 2026

Hello, Class of 2026.

Congratulations. Sincere congratulations.

Four years ago, I was on Deering Meadow as your class gathered for March Through the Arch. Your families lingered nearby, taking one more photograph, straightening a collar, holding on a few seconds longer than planned before finally letting go. I was honored to observe their pride and welcome you to the University while serving as president of the Northwestern Alumni Association Board of Directors.

Now here we are, joined again by tradition. This time, I am writing on behalf of the 50th Reunion class as we welcome you, the newest graduates of Northwestern University, with the enthusiasm of people who know what you did to get here.

The Class of '76 and the Class of '26 are linked in ways that go beyond the satisfying symmetry of our graduation years. We are bookending the nation's birthday: My class graduated as America threw itself a bicentennial celebration; yours heads into the world as the country approaches 250 years. There's a deeper connection, though, that is less festive and more meaningful. Both of our classes emerged at unsettling times.

My classmates and I arrived at Northwestern in the long shadow of Watergate, and we graduated as the Vietnam War finally, painfully ended. The country felt unmoored in ways that were hard to articulate and impossible to ignore.

You enrolled when COVID-19 still loomed large. You inherited a country in sustained argument with itself over foundational matters. You were asked, repeatedly, to adapt to shifting conditions before you had finished adjusting to the previous ones.

That kind of prolonged uncertainty does something to a person that more settled times simply don't. It builds a specific kind of judgment, the ability to sit with ambiguity and still make decisions, the capacity to keep moving when the clearer path hasn't revealed itself yet. I am not romanticizing what your four years required of you. I am noting what those years built in you.

There are also real differences between the world you are entering and the one my class joined.

When I left Northwestern in 1976, staying in touch was genuinely difficult. Letters took time. Long-distance phone calls cost money that many of us didn't have in great supply. The slow erosion of distance and years was accepted as an ordinary feature of adult life; there was no real alternative. Friendships that deserved to survive sometimes didn't, not out of indifference, but because the effort required to maintain them eventually exceeded what daily life left room for.

But for you, the ability to stay connected—to your classmates, to Northwestern, to the larger world you are stepping into—has never been more accessible or more powerful. I know something about this from personal experience. A substantial part of my career in public service was spent working to build and expand the infrastructure that makes that connectivity possible and to ensure it reaches communities that need it most.

The people sitting near you right now are worth the effort to keep close. The friends you knew you during these four years—not a carefully composed version of you but the real one, working through difficulty in real time—can provide support that friends made under easier circumstances rarely do.

Northwestern, too, will keep giving if you remain in relationship with it. My story certainly reflects that truth. During my senior year, I met a woman named Leslie A. Wiley '79. We got married and have built a life together that has been the finest thing I have done.

Northwestern, after graduation, also connected me with mentors, among them former Federal Communications Commission chairs Newton Minow '49, '50 JD, '65 H ('12 P) and Richard Wiley '55, '58 JD ('28 GP), who showed me concretely what it looks like to treat public service as a vocation rather than a line on a résumé.

What I gained at Northwestern did not end when I received my diploma. It kept developing, opening doors, shaping the choices I made for decades afterward. Your relationship with Northwestern will do the same.

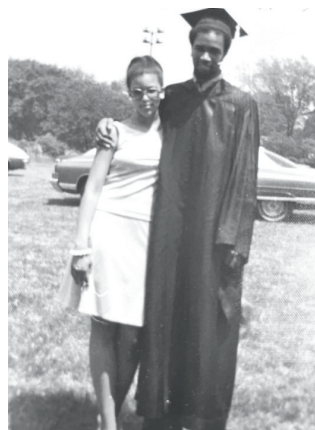
You are leaving with something real: the ability to think carefully, engage honestly with hard problems, and do serious work without waiting for conditions to become more convenient. The world has no shortage of challenges that will require precisely those talents and skills.

Be thoughtful and courageous. Take the leap when it deserves to be taken. Tend the relationships that matter. Hold on to what you actually believe. Stay curious longer than seems strictly necessary. Stay connected to the people, organizations, and institutions that are important to you.

From all of us in the Class of 1976: We are proud of you—specifically, genuinely, and with a full understanding of what these four years asked of you. We can't wait to witness what you will do next.

Go 'Cats!

—Larry Irving '76



Larry Irving '76 on his graduation day with his future wife, Leslie A. Wiley '79