THE NEW SCHOOL

2011 University Commencement Remarks from Chandler Griffith

Thank you President Van Zandt for that generous introduction. To the faculty, the board of trustees, parents, family, friends, and, most importantly, the class of 2011, congratulations. I am truly impressed, and I'm not just talking about the honorary degree recipients behind me. Any other day, they would have my undivided attention. I mean them no disrespect, but today, my eyes are solely on you, my fellow graduates. I've seen you in classes, on campus, at parties and protests, in print and on screen. The amount of human capital in this auditorium is truly astonishing.

I know what you are thinking. This guy talks a good game. He is tall, dark, handsome, and not to be trusted. To that, I say that you've got a good eye. But what you can't see, is that I'm also completely crazy. Now, I don't mean crazy in that "climate change doesn't exist" sort of way, or that "lets deny equal rights to same sex partners" type of way. That would be insane. I'm talking about that special brand of crazy that makes you think you can be and do things bigger than you are. Fortunately, I see that I am not alone.

Clearly, the only place where a crazy and overly ambitious radical could thrive is The New School. This university was founded on a whim. A group of friends got together in 1918 and decided to experiment with a new form of education. They formed a school where people could learn freely and uncensored. And almost a century later, this school still manages to evolve and stay "new" and current. It's a place for people, who want to enact change, to change the things that make them crazy.

I'm crazy about food. For me, all things involve food. I want to overhaul our defunct and dangerous global food system. It is currently a system that perpetuates malnutrition, obesity, pollution, climate change, inequality, discrimination, and greed. Right now, half the world is obese while the other half starves. The population is growing, yet soil fertility and productivity are declining. Organic food, the norm for thousands of years, is now seen as an elite lifestyle choice. Food prices are rising all over the world inciting conflict and violence. All these things can be fixed, but not without a fight.

My obsession with food started in my childhood. I was a fat kid that loved food. After losing over 200 pounds, I am still a fat kid that loves food. My desire to change the food system developed in a small classroom in the Bronx. I realized that even if my students wanted to eat better, they simply couldn't without better access. Working in Ethiopia, I had the chance to see what true hunger looks like. I also saw how food can bring people together, or tear them apart. I saw how resilient people can be, and how powerful and dangerous one small idea can be. I wanted an education that would show me how to take one of those ideas, and turn it into a revolution. That is why I'm here, at The New School, drafting all of you in my fight to change the way that the world eats.

I see that everyone saw my Facebook post about wearing long robes and ridiculous hats if you want to join me in my food revolution. I'm glad there are so many of us and, frankly, I'm touched by the solidarity. So, at our first official meeting, I'm going to outline the rules of my revolution. There are only two.

The first rule is that you have to talk. Talk before, during, and after every meal. Talk about where your food came from, how it got to you, and who made it happen. Fortunately, this is something I know that you already do indirectly. When you talk about poverty, injustice, and death, you are talking about food. When you talk about design, innovation, community engagement, and art, you are talking about food. If you care about fossil fuel consumption, water use, and pollution, start with food.

The second rule is that you have to think about at least one other person every time you eat. It can be the person you are eating with, the person who cooked, or even someone you wish was at the table. You can think about the farmers who were benefited or harmed by your choice of meals. You can think about the people that will be affected or inspired by the lifestyle choices that your meal represents. Bottom line, what you must not forget is that food connects us to the earth, to our mortality, and ultimately to each other.

If you remember nothing else from this little rant, other than my overuse of the word "food," please hold on to two very important facts: 1) You are what you eat, and 2) You are graduating from The New School.

To my first point, as you all go out for your celebratory dinners tonight, you need to ask yourself who you

want to be. Are you a dinner that was born from fossil fuels, perpetuates social injustice, and threatens future generations? Or are you a dinner that supports local economies, contributes to environmental security, and promotes equality? This is not about guilt or obligation. It's about pride and appreciation. By simply changing the way we eat, we can improve the quality of life for people in our communities, both locally and globally. It's not too late to change the menu.

To my second point, you are graduating from The New School! While there are currently students graduating all over the world, none have the distinct honor of being us. Wear that New School badge of crazy with pride, because you will take it with you wherever you go. Look around and realize that the people in this room are going to be responsible for not only how the future looks, but more importantly, how people see it. We are designers, architects, scientists, researchers, and educators. We are analysts, artists, development workers, statisticians, and politicians. We are writers, actors, musicians, filmmakers, and dancers. We are radicals. We are agents of change. We are the 2011 graduating class of The New School. I assure you, the world is not ready for us. But that's ok, because WE are ready.

Thank you.