Remarks by Dr. Jean Marmoreo on her receiving an Honorary Doctorate from McMaster University - May 22, 2025

Chancellor Smith, President Farrar, Dean O'Byrne, distinguished faculty and guests, elated and relieved parents, antsy and beaming graduates, cheering families and friends…

Thank you!

I am incredibly honoured to receive this degree from my alma mater. As a teenager, I wanted nothing more than to go to university. Like many of you, I would be the first in my family to do that – and McMaster, close to our family farm in Dunnville, provided the pathway.

I'm also grateful to speak to the 500 of you in the nursing class. When I graduated 60 years ago, there were 18 of us, all women of course. But then, as now, a nursing degree can take you places you never thought you'd go.

Nurses these days become CEOs of hospitals and deans of nursing schools. They run huge consulting firms. This year, a nurse practitioner at SickKids, Jennifer Stinson, won a Gairdner Award. These Canadian prizes are given to the top medical researchers in the world, and one in four Gairdner Awardees goes on to win the Nobel Prize.

I was a psychiatric nurse who became a doctor. But nursing is much more than a stepping stone to something else. At its essence, nursing is about a quality the world always needs more of, and especially today: that is, caring with great skill.

The Ontario Nurses Association has a bus shelter campaign that says simply: "Nurses Know". Indeed, this year for the 23rd year in a row, nursing has been voted the most trusted profession in North America. So…yes, nurses know.

Sixty years ago I had no idea where my degree in nursing would take me and neither did my classmates. Most followed our husbands across the country and beyond, always able to find work. So while your uniforms have changed from starched white bibs and winged caps to scrubs and runners, the essence of the job will never change, whether you're a street nurse, an operating room nurse, a palliative care nurse or an AI informatics nurse doing knowledge translation.

The essence will never change because the spine, the backbone of any health-care system is people who care with great skill; that is to say, nurses. You.

You have the most useful degree in the world. You solve problems…and you care. If you didn't care, you would never have enrolled, let alone graduated today.

I also think you are the stalwarts of our embattled healthcare system; members of an elite group of professionals who…as one of my classmates succinctly defined us in the following way…

- **You compliment complete strangers on the size of their veins.**
- **You have weekends off planned a year in advance.**
- **You believe the waiting room should be supplied with a Valium salt lick.**
- **Discussing dismemberment over lunch seems perfectly normal.**
- **You believe in aerial spraying of Prozac.**
- **You're not at all surprised when your patient says: "I have no idea how that got there."**

Okay…

Let me take you back to 1962, my first year in nursing at Mac. We huddled in the front row of our Saturday morning organic chemistry class, our backs to the 100 or so young men, hooting and whistling behind us…until the professor shut them all down by saying that we would outshine them all in grades.

Back then, we were challenged to just find our place among the 'real nurses' who were being trained in the hospitals. At times, it all came down to uniforms and caps.

The starched bibs of Hamilton General or the elegant winged caps of St. Mike's made ours feel like candy-stripers and our fate after we graduated seemed destined to admin and time sheets behind desks.

Real nurses— are you.

And your great luck is to graduate into a world where the pace of change will never be as slow as it is today.

Today, there are 7,500 nurse practitioners among the half million nurses at work in Canada. It's clear they will be playing a huge role in alleviating the family doctor shortage that's hobbling our healthcare system. And because all nurse practitioners are specialists and nursing is changing faster than ever, you will likely graduate in a specialty that doesn't even have a name yet.

I was a family doctor for 45 years.

10 years ago, there were no MaID doctors in Canada, and in 2016 I became one of the first doctors in Canada offering medical assistance in dying. Today, 10 per cent of assisted deaths are provided by nurse practitioners.

Five years ago, the use of psychedelics in relieving treatment-resistant depression and PTSD didn't exist. Today, I am working to onboard them in my work as a fly-in physician in the High Arctic. And speaking of the North, the entire health-care system up there is braced by nurses and nurse practitioners.

So if you're still thinking: "I have my nursing degree. Now what am I going to do with it?" believe me, there's a brave new world of opportunities waiting for you.

Your world is different from the one I set out in.

I could only go wide. Or go deep.

You can go wide AND deep.

Dr. Loretta Ford founded the first nurse practitioner program in the world at the University of Colorado in 1965. Looking back on her long career, she said: "I've been kicked and kissed, reviled and revered, crucified and credited."

So if you can put up with the risks that come with all those things, you can become not just a professional, but an activist for change. And as has been said of activism, "you can't wring your hands and roll up your sleeves at the same time."

Here are some splendid opportunities: the Ontario government is promising every one of the 14 million of us access to primary care. That simply can't be done without nurse practitioners.

Pharmaceuticals, robotics, and AI are ushering in a new age in how we manage illness. Who will administer, monitor and deliver all that? Nurses.

And as always, delivering that care with great skill. No matter your path forward - once a nurse , always a nurse.

I can't think of a better preparation for that world than the world you are graduating from today.

I congratulate you all.