

# VALEDICTORIAN SPEECH FOR PATTEN UNIVERSITY 2019 HERE I AM!

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*by Tommy “Shakur” Ross*

I never imagined earning a college degree let alone delivering a valedictorian speech at the graduation! But here I am! As a kid growing up in South Central L.A., I had problems in school, beginning in elementary. I fought, I acted out in class, I got swats from the principal, and harsh whippings from my father when I got home. I was so misunderstood and no one seemed to really care. But here I am! In junior high, I was expelled from seven different schools. I was given the boot for things like gang activity, gambling, getting smart with the teacher, leaving school without permission, cutting class, being threatened by rival gang members, and fighting before being kicked out of the Los Angeles Unified School District altogether and sent to an all-boys school in East Los Angeles. But here I am! I was in and out of juvenile hall, I did time in County Probation Camp, and California Youth Authority. Consequently, I never attended high school in my Community—I was locked up, mentally and physically. But here I am! Still, in 1983, I managed to get my high school diploma while in Youth Authority. Back then I didn't give a damn about getting an education—it had no value to me. But here I am!

Welcome everyone! My name is Tommy Ross, in 1993 I began going by Shakur. It's been a journey growing into the shoes of Shakur, but here I am! Today, I am thankful, I am grateful, I am appreciative and this is what Shakur means. With that, I'd like to thank everyone for attending this commencement ceremony in celebration of the graduation class of 2019. Everybody, let's give it up for ourselves one time!

I want to share with you my journey through the College Program, and some of the challenges I've had to overcome in order to get to this stage today. In sharing my journey, it is my hope to share with you the journey of my fellow graduates as well. I may be the valedictorian for this graduating class, but when it's all said and done, we all put in work and will be receiving the same Associate of Arts Degree no matter what our GPA is. I am merely a reflection of you, and this is an achievement we all can be proud of.

My journey towards graduating was not without its challenges. In my early semesters at Patten, I lacked the communication and social skills required in an academic environment. But here I am! For me, this deficit was the most challenging part of being a college student. I believe it stems from my school experience during my child and adolescent years. I had issues with shame, anger, people in authority, and low self-esteem resulting from unprocessed trauma. As a result I found myself triggered by both teachers and students inside the classroom and at study hall. But here I am! In class, it seemed like oftentimes I'd raise my hand to speak, but the instructors would pass me over, calling on the more talkative students. It was frustrating to think I was being ignored, overlooked, or forgotten. Naturally, this discouraged me from participating in classroom discussions, or asking for help. But here I am!

When in study hall, I'd sign up in the twenty minute slots for tutorship, and whenever the tutors so much as went four or five minutes into my allotted time, without calling my name, I'd get up and leave with a frown and a pout. But here I am! Yes, I had issues, but the more eager I became to learn, the more inquisitive I came

to be. I began being proactive by confidently asserting myself, and raising my hand more often. I'd say things like, "I believe I was next," or "Excuse me I have something to say." As a result, I began feeling more confident, and started sitting in the front of the class. I became motivated to be the best student I could be, deciding I would not deny myself the opportunity to learn as much as I could; and to be patient. The college program taught me both social and coping skills, impacting not only my academic intelligence, but my emotional intelligence as well; and now, here I am!

As of today, I've been incarcerated for almost 34 years, and about four years before that. That's right, 38 years out of the 53 years of my existence have been in a jail cell. Had I understood the power and value of education, I believe the outcome of my life would have been different. After about five years into this prison stint, I longed for opportunities at higher education and rehabilitative programs. Unfortunately, there was no substantial programming available at the previous eight prisons I was caged at. It wasn't until 2011, when I saw a flier on the wall at California Men's Colony, which provided information and requirements needed to be accepted into the Prison University Project at San Quentin. I wrote the College program and received a letter from David Cowan, accepting me into Patten. I was so enthused! I came here in 2012, and was placed on the waiting list and waited for a full year; but now here I am!

In my very first class—English 99A in the summer of 2013 (shout out to Allison Lopez who was one of the instructors back then)—I wrote a persuasive essay that presented the question, "Should same-sex marriage be legalized?" I was totally against it, and this was around the time the law was passed in California. I argued that the legalization of same-sex marriages was more harmful to society than good because it would radically redefine marriage, sending harmful messages to America's youth, undermining principles of morality. I believed that same-sex marriages were morally wrong and went against God's plan of procreation. That was my position back then. But my thinking began to shift during English 101A in the Spring of 2014. Vera Shapirsheteyn was one of the instructors. Initially, she had perhaps the greatest impact on my ability to learn. Vera introduced us to queer and feminist literature that radically changed the way I thought about writing and expressing myself. Our readings included James Baldwin's "Giovanni's Room," Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" and Zora Neal Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

In Vera's class, we couldn't just raise our hands and make a blanket statement about the readings without articulating and deconstructing an argument. She challenged us as students in a way that forced us to think critically. Because of those class discussions, which included thought contributions of other students, I began to see marginalized people and communities in a different light. I too am marginalized, so who am I to judge the way a person identifies or defines him, them, or herself? The way I see it today is that consenting adults have the right to choose how they want to live, and who they want to live with. My thinking was flawed, and I was homophobic, but here I am! I am Shakur for my education because it has given me the ability to look at life through a different lens. A more informed lens, a lens that compels me to question things critically. Equally important, I am forever Shakur to Vera for providing me with a solid foundation in reading and composition, because it has carried me throughout the semesters that followed; and will continue to be of use to me for the rest of my life.

In the fall of 2014, during the English 204 course, I wrote a research paper entitled, "Sexuality and Empowerment: A Feminist Perspective." I am most proud of this work because it altered my worldview about women, igniting the initial spark that led to my identity as a feminist—which means I'm in solidarity for equal rights of women. It also means that I no longer stare or objectify them; but treat them with respect, as human beings. My first step in this journey was to understand how women were oppressed and the role I had to play in it. As I began reflecting upon my experiences with women, I started to see how my social conditioning pitted boys against girls, which created adversarial relationships between the sexes. During my research, I learned how women have had to struggle against violence, gender oppression, inequality and

systems of sexism and patriarchy. And now that I know all this, I feel obligated to support them in their struggles. As men, we should acknowledge the strength and resiliency in women, how—despite their fate—they continue to define themselves, and to see themselves as capable, strong, and assertive social agents of change. My research has taught me that feminism is not a box for women to be locked in. Now who would've thought that I, a former full-fledged, hard-core, misogynistic gangbanger, would be writing papers on feminist theory—but here I am!

It's only fitting to acknowledge that my fellow graduates and I didn't get to this stage on our own. Our academic attainment would not have been possible without the dedication and commitment of the Patten College administrators, instructors, tutors, clerks, and classmates. It's too many of you to name individually, but we're Shakur to you for showing up for us the way you did over the years. You have been instrumental to our successes as students. To our friends, we are Shakur for your unconditional love and support. And Shakur to Robert E. Burton Adult School and the prison administration for supporting the college program. Special Shakurness to my partner, my ride or die, my fiancé—Adrienne Skye Roberts. She has been my inspiration for when I wrote papers on gender identity and feminism. I'd send her final drafts that were marked up and graded by my instructors, and she would add her comments and return the paper to me. Adrienne also challenged my perspective and worldview on the LGBTQ community, which has motivated me to be more inclusive, tolerant, and accepting towards people who see themselves differently. I'm Shakur to my cousin Fania Davis. She is a kind, insightful, and loving person who has motivated me with her overall support, words of encouragement, and feedback on the writings that I've mailed to her over my years as a student. Joe Garcia, a fellow incarcerated person, was someone I relied on daily during both the Elementary and Intermediate Algebra courses. Although he used shaming sarcasm as a method of tutoring, he was very effective because it challenged me to learn my lessons. What I really appreciate about Joe is that he dedicated his time to helping me, no matter how uncommon his common sense was. I have to acknowledge my mother, Bessie Mae Ross, my lil' brother, David Ross, my father Robert Ross, and my son Deauty Ross who have passed on into the next life. I dedicate this accomplishment to you. Thank you for watching over me, and for being a constant source of strength and motivation. Here I am!

Finally, to my fellow graduates. I know I've shared the classroom with all of you at one time or another. We've faced a number of challenges, whether it was lock-downs, fog-lines, badgering officers, annoying classmates, delayed counts, extended yard-downs, late cell releases, deaths in the family, Board denials etc.; but here we are! We did it! We are Patten University graduates! Let this moment serve as a testament that we can accomplish the things that we put our minds to. This is a victory! Education is transformative, once you have it, nobody can take it away from you. So if you have a mind to further your education, I encourage you to do it. I know for me personally, this has been a rewarding experience; I'm strongly considering pursuing a Bachelor of Arts in Social Work at San Francisco State upon my release. Being a student at Patten provided my life with meaning and purpose, and a sense of accomplishment. Each day that I read, studied, wrote an essay, or prepared for an oral presentation, I could feel myself learning, growing and becoming a better human being. It's analogous to a caterpillar in a cocoon, metamorphosing into a beautiful butterfly and taking flight! We have come! In the words of songsters McFadden and White, "Ain't no stopping us now—we're on the move!" Congratulations fellow Patten University alumni! Thank you.