

{As Prepared for Delivery}

**Menominee Tribal College Commencement
June 3, 2006
Keshena, WI**

**Thomas C. Dorr
Under Secretary for Rural Development
Remarks**

Thank you, and good morning – and allow me to bring congratulations and greetings from Secretary Mike Johanns.

First and foremost: Congratulations, graduates. This is your day.

Congratulations on a job well done, and a life's journey well begun.

Congratulations as well to the parents, families, teachers, and mentors of this, the class of 2006. This is your achievement too.

I know you are very proud of what these young people have accomplished and are eager to cheer them on as they begin the next chapter of their lives. This is indeed a great day, for all of you.

You know, I have to admit that my own graduations are getting a bit dim in memory. If I recall correctly, I remember being excited -- but perhaps even more relieved just to have it over with.

In more recent years, however, I have sat through the graduations of my own children, and many more as a member of the Iowa Board of Regents. I wish today, frankly, that I had taken notes.

Yet, in the past, I have been sitting where you are today, wishing that long-winded fellow in front would finish up and sit down because we had a party planned afterwards. Well, today I am the fellow up front -- and I am mindful of the story, perhaps apocryphal, of the book report a little boy once wrote about Julius Caesar:

“Julius Caesar lived a long time ago,” it began. “Julius Caesar was a general. Julius Caesar made long speeches. They killed him.”

That’s probably a good thing for a commencement speaker to remember.

However, it is an honor to have been asked to say a few words to mark this occasion. I want to thank Dr. Fowler, whose leadership I know has meant so much to this college over the years, for giving me this opportunity. From what I've learned, she is a very effective and special leader.

Also, although he is not here today, I would like to pause just a moment to recognize and thank Dave Saffert -- a good friend, I know, to many of you here. But Dave is retiring this month after many years of outstanding service to USDA Rural Development and the nation.

Dave's tireless efforts on behalf of the Menominee Nation -- and of the Native American community across the country -- need no introduction from me. Dave is one of those indispensable people who seems to know everyone and everything about his field. I wish I could talk him into staying on with us. He is, regrettably for us at USDA, headed home to Wisconsin, so I suspect you will be seeing more of him in the years to come. Dave sends his regards and his regrets for not being able to attend.

This IS a great day. A college commencement is several things. For the graduates -- who are taking your leave from this institution -- it is a parting.

But for the larger community of which this College is a part, it is also a moment of affirmation and renewal. Each year the Menominee restore more and more of their community. This graduating class is another milestone on that road.

In a short while, the Class of 2006 will walk off this campus ... some of you likely for the last time ... some to continue your education in other institutions ... some to embark on new jobs and new careers ... and some perhaps, I hope, even to start your own businesses.

But whatever your course, all of you enjoy opportunities beyond the imagining of previous generations. If your ambitions and talents carry you around the world, that's great. You have that opportunity. Be bold. Seize it -- if that is in fact your goal.

But it is likely that many of you will prefer to return here and make a life in Keshena, or elsewhere in Wisconsin, or at least the upper Midwest. And, it is that choice that I would like to briefly address.

Keshena is about 500 miles from my hometown of Marcus, Iowa. It's a little bigger than Marcus, but not much. Both are agricultural. Around Marcus, we grow corn, soybeans, and raise cattle and hogs. Around Keshena, you grow trees.

In both communities, however, most of the jobs are in manufacturing, services, education, or government, not agriculture -- and when it comes to jobs, there simply aren't enough of them to go around. You already know this.

In both Keshena and Marcus, therefore, for many years young people have faced a hard choice.

It's a hard choice that has been all too common simply because -- for too many years -- too many rural communities across the country have been unable to offer opportunities to their young people.

I speak from experience. 40 or so years ago in Marcus -- a year or two or three after our commencement -- most of my class simply left. Of those who went on to college, in fact, I think I was the only one who returned to a family farm. A few others filtered back as teachers or to take over a family business. But most were simply gone.

In this regard, unfortunately, Marcus is not unique. Neither is Keshena. This hollowing out, this loss of the next generation, has been true in thousands of rural communities for many years. It sadly has become a rural tradition -- and this is something we are working very hard to change.

Marcus is a lot like Keshena -- but this is 2006, not 1966. Rural America is changing. It is changing in ways that offer each one of you extraordinary new opportunities that your parents' generation, your grandparents' generation, and my generation did not have:

- **When I graduated, for example, there was no broadband. There was no internet. There were no personal computers. Today,**

however, you can buy an inexpensive hand held calculator with more computing power than a mainframe back then.

- **Back then, rural isolation was still a significant barrier to economic opportunity. My classmates didn't leave Marcus, for the most part, because they wanted to. They left to find jobs. Today however, thanks to broadband, more and more businesses can be done just about anywhere. Manufacturing, distribution, and administration can be decentralized. Every rural business has access to a global market. People are gaining unprecedented new freedom in choosing where to live. This is still in its early stages, but this country is being restructured even as we speak.**
- **Not so long ago, ethanol was a hobby of a few Midwestern farmers. Last year, however, ethanol production in the United States reached 4 billion gallons. Today, ethanol, biodiesel, biomass, wind, solar, and other new energy sources are creating enormous new opportunities for the rural economy. Before long, in this wonderful forest in which you live, you will be harvesting energy, not just**

trees. And you will be doing it using technology that enables this without damaging the environment.

- **The list goes on and on, but the basic point is simple. Circumstances have changed. Many of the limitations faced by your parents and grandparents no longer apply. Small towns and rural areas are becoming more competitive than they have been in many, many years. This is truly an exciting time to live in rural America.**

These options, though, aren't automatic. These new opportunities – a networked, knowledge based economy, new energy sources, rural communities with balanced, diversified economies – are still being built. And building that future depends first and foremost on you -- both the graduates we are honoring today, and the Menominee Nation.

The simple truth is, there is no magic formula ... no switch we can throw in Washington, D.C. ... no ready-made solution that can be airlifted in from outside ... that will, by itself, conjure up a new future for Keshena, Marcus, or any other small town.

If government could simply bottle economic success and hand it out on the street, we'd have solved most of the problems of the world a long time ago. But it's a little tougher than that.

Even with all the opportunities presented by new technology, sustainable development must be built one community, one entrepreneur, and one business at a time.

If that sounds like a challenge to this year's graduates, it is -- but the good news is, you don't have to do it alone.

The College of the Menominee Nation has already made a critically important contribution. The College is founded on local initiative and leadership. It has aggressively sought out partners to carry it to an even higher level. It has put itself on the map, and the future is bright.

USDA Rural Development alone has helped finance 10 construction projects in the past 6 years. Frank Frassetto, our Wisconsin State Director for Rural Development, is here today and I'd like to recognize and thank him for the efforts of his staff on behalf of the College.

The College has also established a very promising partnership with the Forest Service, a natural given the Menominee Nation's long and distinguished commitment to sustainable forestry practices.

Other federal agencies – HUD, HHS, Education, DOD – have helped out. And make no mistake: this strategic investment in education is already paying dividends for the entire community:

- The College itself has come a long way from the first graduating class of 2 students in 1995. Today we are honoring over 60 graduates.**
- Since 1990, the overall level of education within the Menominee Nation has increased 15 percent.**
- 15 years ago, 6% of the Menominee had a college degree. Today, 17% have a bachelor's degree or higher. That is an extraordinary rate of growth, and it makes a very real and tangible difference.**

- **In less than a decade, median family income is up over 50% and the percentage of families living in poverty has declined significantly. That didn't happen by accident. It happened because this community and this College created the conditions that made it happen.**

This is impressive progress in a very short period of time. But it's just a beginning. The College is fulfilling its role. Now it is up to you.

Rural America is a land of opportunity, but seizing the opportunity starts with entrepreneurs with vision, passion, and commitment.

It starts with people who are willing to accept the risks and invest the 12 hour days and 70 hour weeks that it takes to build a successful business and a stronger community.

I am confident that some of those people are among the graduates here today, in the Class of 2006.

So whether you leave for the city or come back home to Keshena, let me conclude by wishing you the best of luck in your future endeavors.

Thanks again to the faculty, the graduates, and your families for allowing me to share this time with you today. I cherish young people and I cherish these opportunities to observe new leaders emerge.

It is indeed a privilege to share this occasion with you, and I am proud to see such a promising generation of future leaders. Congratulations, well done, and Godspeed to you all.