

University of Washington School of Public Health
Graduation Celebration
Sunday June 11, 2017 | 12:00 p.m.

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Dr. Natalia Kanem
United Nations Assistant Secretary General and
Acting Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund

To the Dean and the Associate Deans, the distinguished faculty, alumni, colleagues, the student speaker, parents, friends, and the University of Washington School of Public Health graduates of the Class of 2017:

I greet you in the name of Peace.

Class of '17, I'm reliably told that you are the smartest, and the most diverse, *and* the best-looking class to graduate from this school.

Graduates, your chosen field of public health is as wide as the world. Your mission is the welfare of humankind. You join a project that has engaged the best and the brightest, the most hopeful and caring and dedicated and idealistic, throughout the ages.

A monumental turning point in that project came in the middle of the last century. Consider these words:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE UNITED NATIONS DETERMINED

- to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and
- to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and
- to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and
- to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

AND FOR THESE ENDS

- to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours, and
- to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and
- to ensure, by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and
- to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

HAVE RESOLVED TO COMBINE OUR EFFORTS TO ACCOMPLISH THESE AIMS

So begins the Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, which was affirmed some seventy years ago through representatives assembled not far from here in the city of San Francisco.

The fundamental Peace mission of the United Nations is more vital today than ever. Today's world is characterized by ever greater integration, thanks to technology and travel; but, at the same time, great alienation. It is the world of the largest ever youth generation, 1.8 billion strong. We also have the greatest number of people over sixty in world history, a testament to the triumph of public health over the last hundred years. And yet there is still this unconscionable fact: today we witness the largest number of people ever in

history shocked by war and violent conflict – over 65 million fleeing refugees and an ever-growing number of internally displaced people.

Conflict and climate change compound each other, with competition for scarce resources - land, energy, water - a factor among the root causes of violence in many parts of our world. And it is women and children who typically bear the brunt of such crisis and displacement, with their lives disrupted and with diminished hope.

In answer to these crises, the 193 member states of the United Nations recently adopted – unanimously – Goals for the Sustainable Development of our planet. The Sustainable Development Goals identify actions to be taken during the next decade, through the year 2030.

Such as: An end to poverty. Zero hunger. Better health and well-being for all. Education. Clean water. Decent jobs. Equality.

There are seventeen of these Goals, and they are planned to all work together. They're indivisible; each one affects the other. And the big aspiration, as articulated by United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres, is to Leave No-One Behind.

Nevertheless, I'm willing to confess I may have a favorite. And it's not the health goal. It's Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions.

And to explain that, I will tell you a story, about my friend Fatina, who is just 10 years old.

In Fatina's mountain community, livestock are highly valued, and it is her duty to look after the household, to wake up early in the morning, and to fetch water for her relatives as well as for the animals. She is expected to adhere to cultural traditions that span hundreds of years. These may only allow her to complete a few years of schooling, because the pre-eminent priority is going to be on Fatina preparing herself for marriage in just a few years, not her education. There is unlikely to be any consideration of Fatina's own independent ideas and dreams, which is not the case for her brothers.

Fatina doesn't really know much about how the human body works; yet, at the moment of menstruation she will be deemed ready to become a woman, and she will face powerful pressure to undergo certain rituals that may put her at risk for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. She is highly likely to start bearing children before the age of 18, with all of the attendant risks of death in childbirth due to her immature physical body.

Today, there are literally millions of Fatinas in all corners of the globe.

My story intertwines with hers. As we seek to help Fatina in my UN team, if we pay close attention, we find that her experience in turn will inform and inspire us in our broader mission. If her country is safe from war, her future prospects will increase. If the education and the health systems is strong, her life will be uplifted. Peace; strong, stable, just institutions.

And, in my own immigrant story, coming to the United States from Panama at the age of seven, being shifted from one culture to another made me look much more closely at cultural imperatives and to question certain premises.

I made my way as a twenty-year-old to the first United Nations international women's conference, which was held in Mexico City. That was in 1975. Later, I attended landmark UN conferences such as the one on Population & Development in Cairo, and then the next year, in 1995, the Women's Conference in Beijing, where we boldly declared: Women's Rights are Human Rights; and, we coined the term "reproductive health," to relate issues of childbirth and reproduction to women's free choice.

As a young pediatrician, through my work on child protection and on HIV, I came to understand that the individual problems of my tiny patients fit patterns that I was not going to be able to resolve on my own. So, like you, graduates, I sought the wisdom of this faculty, and I am forever grateful to the Departments and allied partners that guided my footsteps.

I witnessed here at the University of Washington the interplay between local factors and global factors. I participated in surveys in Washington and Oregon States and their departments of public health under the direction of Dean Gil Omenn and Dr. Mark Oberle. I went to rural Mozambique with an international

health alliance led by Steve Boyd and Nancy Anderson and others to alert midwives on how to avert HIV infection in their daily practice in their village.

And later, as you heard, I worked at foundations on international public health at the policy level.

Today I'm most proud to represent UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, long led by the late renowned public health giant Dr. Babatunde Osotimehin, to whom I pay tribute today. UNFPA is the international agency with the largest reach in providing vital sexual and reproductive health services, family planning, and contraception for the world's most vulnerable women and girls. We work with governments and communities to ensure that every pregnancy is wanted, every childbirth is safe, and every young person's potential is fulfilled.

What we have learned from Fatina and her sisters is that the health and welfare of society at large depends on the health and welfare of individuals, of the most vulnerable members of society. In truth, the future belongs to a ten-year-old girl.

When her health is jeopardized, when she is denied basic information and understanding of her own body and human sexuality, she is free to be victimized, and to be trafficked. When she is prevented from having a choice in the timing and number of her children, when she is deprived of education and personal fulfillment, it is not just the ten-year-old girl who is affected. Her community, her country, and all of us suffer as well when her human potential goes unrealized.

When a girl is able to exercise her rights, to stay healthy, to complete her education, and to make decisions about her own life, then she wins, and everyone around her wins. Poverty is reduced across the society. Productivity increases. Democracy flourishes. Infant mortality goes down. Health and welfare improve across the entire society.

Dear Graduates, the lesson of Fatina is this (and it echoes something that our student speaker has said):

National and global action are necessary to address the local, to leave no one behind. Local action is equally necessary to inform the global.

There's an African proverb says: "Depend upon one to count to two."
Plato said it like this: "You cannot conceive the many without the one."

Graduates, it is this understanding that illustrates the importance of your commitment to excellence in your particular area of service, as you embark on the next exciting phase of your public health career.

Without strong institutions, without peace, without a strong health system, our efforts to help girls at the pivotal age of ten may falter. And the health proposition as a whole may falter, because every part of the framework determines the functionality and the completeness and the strength of the whole working system.

I'd like to add that part of that framework is the importance of partnership. The UN, for example, brokers effectively and efficiently government partnerships. We partner with communities, with regional groupings, with private business and with philanthropies and donors. Notable among the philanthropies is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; its president Chris Elias, who leads their Global Development Program, is a strategist and a visionary leader, and a fellow member of my class at the UW School of Public Health.

The story of public health is one of resounding success. Yet, there are as yet many unwritten chapters, much left to be accomplished.

By you!

Class of 2017, look around you. It's been tremendous to see and appreciate the support that you have in this auditorium today and that you will continue to have, from your parents and guardians, from your mentors, friends, and significant others. Many of them are here with us today; others may not be here physically because of distance, or perhaps because of spiritual transition. But their love buoys you, across space and time.

So, share your life with the people you love. And, share your story with people you don't know, as you listen and reciprocate. In other words, choose the option to build bridges – to explore rather than repel difference, and to humanize your work.

Look to your left, look to your right (metaphorically speaking).

This is your cohort. This is the group that represents friendships and relationships you have made that will last you for a lifetime, that will nurture and support you throughout your career. And in just a few moments, you become an alum too. Join the UW alumni association and keep your connections here alive. As a UW product, be responsive, be thankful, and give back with pride to your community, including this School; it has challenged you, I'm sure it has maybe stressed you out at times, but it has gotten you to the point of your fantastic achievement here today. Be Gold and be Bold.

And look up. Because many of the challenges you're going to face may appear daunting. "Do not let what you cannot do tear from your hands what you can." Your vision and your talents are sorely needed today. Therefore, focus on "what you can" do, like never before.

Look up, because the sky is the limit. You have the confidence that comes from being well prepared. Beyond that preparation, engage your imagination, and your ingenuity. Innovate. Give yourselves the thrill of solving some of the world's hardest problems, because these difficult issues are going to be the most engaging.

As examples: There is much work left to be done on pandemics known and unknown; and our university graduate Dr. Mary Bassett is doing that with Ebola and Zika as head of the New York City Department of Health and Mental

Hygiene. You will find statistical challenges to track the care and treatment of an ever-mobile, ever-restless population, which is part of the preoccupation of demographers and statisticians. And you will need to resolve some of the intergenerational effects on health as Professor Irvin Emanuel pioneered here at this great School. So never hesitate to put your own ingenuity into the mix.

Look up. Be resolute. Take every opportunity to defend the rights of women and girls. It's the smart thing to do, and it is the right thing to do. My friend Fatina is going to be about twenty-five years old in the year 2030, which is the reach of the Sustainable Development Goals. Will she be benefitting from world progress by then?

So look up, and allow yourself to be inspired and informed, by both the local and the global, and keep yourself in the Optimism Lane.

And as you look around, remember to look after yourself, too. Recognize the power of looking inward, whether we call it meditation, prayer, or reflection; know yourself, and heal yourself. Pace yourself, so you don't get tired in the battle. The world needs your talent, and to be good for others you must be good to yourself.

Recognize the power of Beauty, the power of beauty to renew and restore. Enjoy the beauty of nature. Recharge, with friends or in solitude, over music, or walking at the shore, or whatever it is that brings you Peace.

Because my wish for you is unlimited horizons! May this glorious day, so full of possibility, continually figure as a source of inspiration to you. Forge your imprint upon the health of your local community and of planet Earth. We need your capacity, we need your smarts, we need your caring, and your determination.

Dearest School of Public Health class of 2017, you've earned your laurels. Go forth and wear them with pride!

Thank you!