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Remarks as Prepared: DCWP Commissioner Levine Delivers Remarks at City Year New York Graduation

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Good afternoon, graduates!

Thank you, Annie, for the kind introduction. And thank you to you and your team for the work that you do. Your impact on our city cannot be overstated.

Today is a special day. It is also a nostalgic day for me. As Annie mentioned—and I won't hold it against her for outing my age—I sat exactly where you are, nearly two decades ago.

I was 23 years old: wide-eyed, ambitious, and uplifted by a year of service as an after-school helper in a public school on the South Side of Chicago.

It was, much like today, a perilous moment for our country and our world. Hundreds of banks had failed in the financial crisis. Millions saw their jobs evaporate overnight. Millions more lost their homes, foreclosed on without much of an opportunity to say goodbye. Anxiety seemed to seep into every conversation.

It was an uncertain moment. But then again, uncertainty was not unique to 2008. It's not unique to 2026, either.

Sitting where you are now, amid a hazy future, I still remember feeling hopeful.

Part of that hope came from a young senator who lived just a few blocks from the school where I taught reading and writing. Barack Obama had managed to galvanize something deep and real in the American people, myself among them.

But the chief part of that hope came from the students I worked with every day. It came, in other words, from the realization that democracy does not begin in the corridors of power in Washington. It begins in classrooms. It begins in communities. It begins whenever one person decides another person's future is worth investing in.



That is what all of you have done this year. You chose to spend your time and talents helping others succeed. And in doing so, you joined a tradition that is intrinsically American—and a tradition that is needed now more than ever.

Because what has always made this country exceptional is not that we agree on everything. It's not about the commonality of our backgrounds, our ancestry, or our politics. It's the belief that we have obligations to one another. That civic duty is not simply something we possess, but something we practice every day.

I am no longer 23. But I stand before you feeling the same way I felt then. Wide-eyed, aspirational, and optimistic.

Because you remind me that there are people willing to fight for someone they don't know. People willing to cross lines of geography, class, and circumstance in pursuit of a larger purpose. People who understand an important concept: that while we may move faster alone, we always go further together.

Graduates, New York City is in a New Era. As Commissioner of the New York City Department of Consumer and Worker Protection, I have the privilege to work alongside extraordinary public servants fighting to make life more affordable and more just for all 8.6 million New Yorkers. We take on powerful corporations that exploit workers and undermine their rights on the job. We challenge hidden fees and deceptive practices that make groceries and basic goods more expensive for families. We ensure that the economy works not just for the wealthy and well-connected, but for everyone.

It is exciting, meaningful work. And most importantly, it is service.

The same spirit that brought you to City Year is the same spirit that brings people into public service. I sincerely encourage you to lean into it; to commit, and commit fully; to carry the belief that ordinary people, working together, can accomplish extraordinary things.

Trust me: that belief will be tested. Doubt will creep in. But I hope you recognize and appreciate the inestimable value of what you did in this past year—and how this rich experience will pay dividends as you carve your path forward in life.

You know it because you experienced it. Change happens where you can see it. Today, that same idea is breathing new life into New York City.

Mayor Mamdani often speaks about making government work for ordinary people in tangible ways, about proving that public institutions can still improve people's lives. And that's exactly



what you have spent the last year doing. You showed up for public school students. You dared to participate in the civic life of a community.

That difference transcends time and place. Which brings me to the advice I want to leave you with today: *Think globally, act locally.*

Care deeply about the great challenges facing our country and our world. Continue to be unwavering in your vision for what society can become. But never underestimate the power of improving the block in front of you, the neighborhood you live in, or the school down the street.

So, graduates, whatever comes next—whether it's teaching, government, organizing, business, law, healthcare, or something you haven't even imagined yet—throw yourself into it. Because your efforts ripple outward.

The students you taught will remember you. The communities you strengthened are better because you showed up. And the country we all share will be stronger because people like you continue choosing service over cynicism, hope over resignation, and action over indifference. Don't lose that conviction.

Oh—and one final thing. If you're looking for your next opportunity to make good trouble, come see us at the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection. We're hiring. And we'd be lucky to have you.

Congratulations, City Year Class of 2026!

Thank you.