



## Fall Honors Ceremony 2007

Good evening. My name is Charlayne McStay and I am honored to have been asked to speak on this occasion.

I would first like to extend my congratulations to the Sophomore Honors certificate recipients and the students receiving various special awards.

Tonight, administrators, faculty, family, and friends are gathered together to celebrate the success of these students.

The Fall Honors Ceremony aims to recognize students who have gone above and beyond typical classroom work by engaging in activities that enrich their lives at the University — academically, culturally, and socially. This evening, we recognize those students who have taken full advantage of the incredible opportunities afforded to us by the Honors Program and the University of Connecticut. In order to receive Sophomore Honors, students do more than excel in their classes. In addition, they participate in various Honors programs that develop students into intellectual, socially-responsible, civic-minded, and culturally-aware individuals. The students being recognized tonight have demonstrated commitment to enriching their college experience and there is no doubt that they will go on to be very successful.

For this reason, I wish to speak directly to the freshman students in the audience. I hope to convey to you the integral role the Honors Program has played in shaping my undergraduate experience and convince you to take advantage of the opportunities that lie ahead. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “The reward of a thing well done is to have done it” and I think the rest of the upperclassmen will agree that the experiences they have had, the relationships they have established, and the challenges they have overcome are worth far more than the recognition they will receive for their accomplishments tonight. It is my hope that you too will fervently pursue these opportunities and make the most of your few short years here.

Prior to my freshman year at UConn, I knew I was a Chemistry major. Chemistry had always come naturally, the equations and theories made sense, and I found it applicable to everyday life —though I know many of you would disagree. There was never a question that chemistry was the field for me and, as a student planning to pursue medicine, it aligned nicely with the typical science track most pre-med students follow. In my first semester, I was challenged by the coursework, established valuable connections with my advisor, and began undergraduate research. Each of these components provided an excellent foundation for a career in medicine.

But leave it to the university's most esteemed faculty— those affiliated with the honors program— to inspire you to amend your original goals. I believe that the Honors Program, particularly one Honors faculty member, played a significant role in enabling me to develop a passion for something very far from the realm of science, yet so markedly relevant to a career in health care.

Before coming to UConn I could not have told you what public health was, but I could have easily walked you through the periodic table. That all changed when I registered for an INTD course entitled Social Medicine. The class was the Freshman Honors Seminar in which many of you are currently enrolled. At the time, I viewed the class as simply an opportunity to meet other honors students and to be introduced to a faculty member. Little did I know that this course would change how I viewed my future role as a physician. I also never imagined that this professor, Dr. Kathryn Ratcliff of the Sociology Department, would become my mentor and that I would later spend time living with her as I studied abroad in a developing country. Now how's that for the close faculty contact that the Honors Program promises.

The INTD course opened my eyes to a world beyond the science of medicine and introduced me to the human side of health care. When I heard that Dr. Ratcliff was leading a study-abroad group to the Dominican Republic this summer, I could not pass the opportunity up. In May, I participated in the inaugural UConn Service-Learning in the Dominican Republic study abroad program. For three weeks, I lived, learned, and volunteered in La Romana, a bustling city on the southeastern coast. During this time, I along with fifteen other students provided education for Haitian immigrants living in the Dominican Republic. We conducted nutrition and health workshops on rural sugar cane plantations and taught English classes at an urban school.

My experiences abroad were life-changing. Many of the people I met lived on less than \$2 per day with no electricity or running water. I vividly remember a piece of gum falling out of my mouth at the first village we visited and watching five starving children dive onto the ground after it. Even as a student who studied human rights, witnessing this was still shocking. Yet the opportunity to see for myself the things I had been reading about in classes was incredibly valuable.

Traveling to a developing country as an undergraduate student with a Sociology professor, has changed how I view medicine and has given me insight into the health care field that I might never have otherwise achieved. The experience demonstrated that medical care sometimes only responds to the symptoms of poverty and not to the issues that cause them— like dirty water, poor nutrition, and lack of education. These core components of health were first made clear to me by Dr. Ratcliff in my Social Medicine INTD and were brought full circle when I witnessed their impact on the lives of the Haitian people.

I returned home with a deeper understanding of what it means to be a doctor and a greater passion to pursue my future goal.

Despite my newly found love of public health and human rights, I remained fascinated by Chemistry. Early in my first semester, my Honors advisor, Dr. Thomas Seery, strongly encouraged me to get involved in undergraduate research. Though I had not yet taken any upper-level science courses, I began working with Dr. Ashis Basu of the Chemistry Department. Dr. Basu's lab sparked my interest because of its focus on cancer research. As a physician, I plan to specialize in pediatric oncology and I feel development of a solid scientific foundation is

critical. As a freshman and sophomore in the lab, I was able to interact with graduate students, who shared my interest in Chemistry, and taught me basic techniques that would be essential for my own research project. As my knowledge grew, I was able to expand my contribution to the team. My involvement with undergraduate research has truly supplemented my coursework. In fact, I often find that I am exposed to concepts in the lab long before reading about them in a textbook.

This summer I began work on my own project with the support of a grant from the Summer Undergraduate Research Fund— specifically a generous donation in honor of Dr. John Tanaka. The focus of my research was on cancer-causing lesions in human kidney cells. The results would be significant in that they would provide scientists a better understanding of the causes of cancer and could help in the development of more effective anti-cancer drugs. At the end of the summer, I realized that my work was far from over and will most likely continue throughout my years here. However I am excited by the prospect of eventually making a significant contribution to the field of cancer research. The SURF program enabled me to engage in full-time research that was directly applicable to the medical field. My involvement with undergraduate research has been essential in providing a well-rounded learning experience as a Chemistry major.

The Honors Program is committed to providing a top-quality educational and social experience to its students through engaging coursework, involved professors, specialized housing, and extracurricular activities. The breadth of opportunities through the UConn Honors Program is virtually limitless. The diverse experiences of each of the students being recognized tonight attest to that.

Margaret Thatcher once said, “Look at a day when you are supremely satisfied at the end. It’s not a day when you lounge around doing nothing; it’s when you had everything to do, and you’ve done it.” As I reflect on my time thus far at UConn, I know that things have not always been easy and it has been a busy two years, yet that is what has made it satisfying. The unique experiences that you will have, the lifelong friends that you will make, and the lessons that you will learn will make your efforts worthwhile. As underclassmen, I hope that you will seek out and explore the vast opportunities the University of Connecticut has to offer, utilize its resources, and maximize your college experience to its fullest potential.

Thank you and I wish you the best of luck in the future.