

Transcript: U.S. Rep. John Lewis at Georgia State University's Fall 2019 Freshman Convocation

Held August 25, 2019, Sports Arena, Georgia State University

REP. LEWIS: Mr. President... Dean... members of the faculty, and to you, smart, brilliant, young members of the student body: you're new. You're ready. To stand up, to speak up, and speak out. To find a way to get in the way.

Georgia State University, this unbelievable place, is located in the heart of my Congressional district, but you must know that I first came to Georgia in 1963, I was 23 years old. I had all of my hair, and I was a few pounds lighter. I left school in Nashville, Tennessee, from American Baptist College and Fisk University, where I have studied the way of peace, the way of love. I've studied philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence.

But you all also must know that I grew up on a farm in rural Alabama. 50 miles from Montgomery, outside of Troy. A little town called Troy, where Troy University is located. My father had been a sharecropper. But back in 1944, when I was 4 years old (and I do remember when I was 4!), how many of you remember when you were 4? What happened to you?

Well, in 1944, when I was 4 years old, my father had saved \$300 and a man sold him 110 acres of land. On this land, we raised a lot of cotton and corn, lots of peanuts. I don't eat too many peanuts today, so don't tell the peanut farmers in Georgia, that I don't eat too many peanuts. I ate so many peanuts when I was growing up, sometimes I just don't wanna see no more peanuts.

But if you come to my congressional office a short distance from here, and come to my office in Washington, the first thing the staff is going to offer you is some Georgia Peanuts, because the Georgia Peanut Commission provide all the members of the Georgia congressional delegation with an adequate supply of peanuts to make available to our visitors. But growing up there, as a child, I would be out there working in the field, sometimes in the hot sun. And I would say to my mother, "this is hard work."

And she would say, "boy, hard work ain't ever killed anybody!"

And I'd say, "well, it's about to kill me."

But working in the field and later going to school taught me a lesson. To never give up, to never give in. To keep the faith, and keep your eyes on the prize. I say to you, young men and women, you must never give up. You must never lose faith. You must be bold, brave, and find a way to get in the way, to get in what I call "good trouble."

When I was growing up, I'd ask my mother, my father, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, my teachers, about the signs that I saw, saying "white men," "colored men," "white women," and "colored women." They would say, "boy, that's the way it is. Don't get in the way and don't get in trouble."

But when I was 15 years old, in 1955, I heard of Rosa Parks. I heard the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. on the radio. The action of Rosa Parks and the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired me to find a way to get in the way. And I got in the way. And I got in trouble, "good trouble." We studied, yes, we studied, the way of peace, the way of love, the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. And we brought down those signs that said, "white men," and "colored

men," "white women," and "colored women." We made it possible for people all across the South to be able to register to vote.

I say to you as students, as young people, learn all that you can learn. And use your education to help change the country, to help change the world, to make this country better and make this world better. You have an obligation to help save the planet. To save the environment. We must save this little piece of real estate that we call Earth for the generation yet unborn. We must realize we have a right to know what is in the food we drink, and what is in the water we drink, and what is in the air we breathe.

You can do it. So I say to each and every one of you as you're standing here at Georgia State University, learn all you can! Then go out there and spread the good news. I say to each and every one of you, while you study here, learn all you can about Georgia, about America, and about the world. We have to save this planet for the generations yet unborn. I will encourage some of you to be volunteers on campaigns. Come to my office a short distance away, and be an intern. Maybe not just here in Georgia, but maybe in Washington. Maybe not just with me, but with other members of Congress.

You can do it. You must do it. Again, I wish each and every one of you well. During the '60's, you know I got arrested a few times. Not for fighting, not for playing hooky from school. But for standing up, for speaking up, following the teaching of Gandhi, of Martin Luther King, Jr. I went to jail 40 times in the '60's. And since I've been in Congress, 5 times. And I'm probably gonna get arrested again for something.

My philosophy is very simple: when you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have a moral obligation to say something, to do something. What is wrong with a society that takes little children from their mothers and fathers and places them in cages. That's not right, that's not fair, that's not just. And if we continue to do it, history will not be kind to us. That's not the American way. And we have to do better.

So, I urge you while you're here to participate in the democratic process. Get registered, here in Georgia or back in your hometown, city or state. And get involved in American politics, so we can change things.

Again, I wish you well. Go in peace. Keep the faith, and keep your eyes on the prize. Work hard, and study hard. Thank you very much.

--END--

Note: This transcription is derived from a recording of the convocation ceremony at <https://youtu.be/dJ3MFJukwZg>. The speech begins near the 28-minute mark.