Thank you, President Bitterbaum for the wonderful introduction. Thank you members of the Cortland Honorary Degree Committee, Nancy Zimpher, Chancellor of the State University of New York, Steven Hunt and members of the SUNY Board of Trustees for bestowing this great honor. I am deeply honored and humbled to receive the Honorary Degree, Doctor of Humane Letters.

Aloha and good morning to you, Dr. Margaret Leng Tan, SUNY faculty and staff, especially Dr. Tim Davis, members of the 2011 graduating class, parents and friends.

Congratulations, class of 2011. This is a joyous day for you, your parents, your friends and SUNY faculty. It’s also a joyous day for the communities in which you will live and work, your country and for the world of people whose lives you will impact. It is a day filled with the Aloha of friends and family who know you now and the Ohana or family that you will love and who will come to love you in the years ahead. My very best wishes to all of you for success and happiness as you use your unique talents and gifts to apply the knowledge and skills that you have acquired in Cortland to make a difference in this world, your global Ohana (family).

I am confident that you will make a difference and find success and happiness if you:

- continue to learn
- inspire others and allow yourself to be inspired by others
- give your best in all you do
- know that there is great happiness in serving others

I encourage you to continue to learn and be inspired by the works of other professionals and as well as by your students. I would not have had the pleasure of speaking to you today, if it were not for an outstanding teacher I had one summer in an outrigger canoe class. My teacher, Miss Jessica Jones, had no knowledge, skill or experience in outrigger canoeing, but she did have nine years of experience living as a child with mobility impairment. Jessica appeared quite unexpectedly one day in my outrigger canoe class of able-bodied students; the leg braces that restricted her participation in so many other activities did not restrict her ability to successfully participate in a team activity with her peers. Her success and shrieks of joy inspired me to develop the sport for people with many types of disabilities. With the development of innovative adaptations, ParaCanoe proved to be an excellent sport for all the major disability groups involved in Paralympic Games. Thanks to Jessica Jones and a team of physical therapists, therapeutic recreation professionals, outrigger canoe instructors and many pioneer paddlers with disabilities, new ParaCanoe opportunities were created for paddlers of all abilities. Over the past thirteen years, ParaCanoe outrigger canoe paddlers competed in world championships in Hawaii, New Zealand, Canada and Poland and promoted the Paralympic vision by proving that they could “inspire and excite the world”. I am pleased to report that last December, the International Paralympic Committee voted to accept the sport of outrigger canoeing in 2016 Paralympic Games in Brazil. I was overjoyed with this news because I had vowed to work diligently to make this happen in my
lifetime or try to do my best to come back and haunt anyone who stood in the way of the vision. I must admit that I was getting a little concerned because I searched the SUNY Cortland catalog and could not find a single course in Introduction to Haunting 101 and I certainly didn’t want to think about the prerequisite for a higher education course in haunting from the Great Beyond.

Trust that you will be successful if you give your best in all you do and provide opportunities for others to be successful. Understand that success can be measured in many ways. Success can be the winning of a major championship by your team, promotion to a new job that provides opportunities for you to share your expertise or finding paid or volunteer work that becomes your passion. Know that success can be measured by the simple smile from a child who cannot speak, direct eye contact or a first word uttered by a child who has been diagnosed with mute autism or a sign given by a person who can only communicate by signing.

Be proud of your service but humble enough to step back and let your athletes or colleagues revel in their well deserved glory when they have excelled and achieved their goals. Stand tall and wipe the tears from your eyes as you watch the American flag being raised above others and hear our national anthem being played when one of your athletes earns a gold medal.

Be thankful that we live in a land of opportunity for people of all abilities. Help create more opportunities for everyone in your community, your state and in your country.

Always be prepared for the time when the joke’s on you; don’t take yourself so seriously that you can’t laugh at yourself... as I vividly recall doing one day when I was serving people with intellectual disabilities working in a production facility referred to at that time as a sheltered workshop. One of the workers pointed to a photo and asked me to read the sign posted on the building....located in Russia. I told her that I couldn’t read the sign. A look of astonishment came over her face and she said, “I can’t read; I thought you could read; did you hear that; Jan can’t read”. I laughed; she laughed and about 70 other workers laughed. I had a lot of explaining to do, but the joke was on me and we all enjoyed the moment. Our ability to laugh together only strengthened our working relationship.

Know there is great happiness in serving others in your workplace, in your home and in your communities. Do so, even when there is no expectation of return. Hawaiians refer to this as the sharing of Aloha. Acknowledge that you may or may not be able to change the world, but if you can change the world for one person, you have accomplished much.

For the past seven years, I have had the honor and privilege of serving as a volunteer teacher and coach to many Wounded Warriors, men and women in the United States military services who have sustained injuries in the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. It has been a joy to provide outrigger canoe and kayak activities for them, using sports to help rebuild their lives. As a civilian, it’s a humbling experience to serve an Army Major, Lieutenant Colonel, Navy Corpsman, Marine Sergeant or Marine Lance Corporal; it’s a rewarding experience to play even a small part in providing opportunities for them to discover what they can do after their injuries, develop self-confidence and give them hope that they can lead productive and happy lives. On this graduation day which is also Armed Forces Day, I am pleased to tell you about one of my heroes who continually inspires me to do my best, Army Major Anthony Smith (Retired), a man whose dusty combat boots I feel unworthy to clean.
In 2004, Major Anthony Smith sustained extensive catastrophic injuries in Iraq due to multiple gunshot wounds and the explosion of a rocket propelled grenade that struck him in the right hip and passed through before detonating. Major Smith flat-lined on the battlefield and was being listed as killed in action when someone noticed an air bubble in a wound on his neck. After coming out of a 62-day drug-induced coma, he awoke to find that he had lost his right arm, hip, upper leg bone, his right kidney and he had sustained extensive damage to his abdominal organs. His vision and hearing were impaired; his spinal cord was damaged and the concussive forces of the explosion had caused traumatic brain injury. Major Smith survived over 50 major surgeries during his long and arduous road to recovery. I am extremely honored to have played a small part in his recovery for a short time, each of two years when he competed in outrigger canoe sprint races in Rochester, NY. Major Smith said that participation in sports saved his life and gave him the will to continue his rehabilitation and fight through pain and frustration. That and the question, “How will you continue to serve?” posed by a representative from the not for profit organization, The Mission Continues.

I am pleased to report that in 2009, Major Smith earned a black belt and received funding to open a martial arts academy. He now teaches 200 at-risk children. Their mantra is “be polite; respect yourself and others; never give up” as they work out and do push-ups alongside their instructor who does his push-ups with one arm and one residual upper limb.

When you think you are having a bad day, feel tired and have difficulty doing your best, think about Major Smith, teaching his young students patience and self-discipline, doing his best to inspire them to do their best.

When you think you are having a good day, think about Major Smith, now in a new uniform, still doing his best to serve his country by serving the youth in his community and inspiring others.

When I wrote to Major Smith and requested permission to tell his story, he replied, “It would be an honor for me for you to use my story to hopefully inspire others and motivate them to live great lives.”

**In His Words:** Service provides purpose in life. I believe the basic building block to becoming a great leader and mentor is to provide service to others unselfishly. A common quote that has grown with me is: “To much that is given, much is required”. Service in the military has taught me that living life is bigger than me. If people want to understand life and have purpose, it comes from helping your fellow man and those in need of your assistance and wisdom. As young people see and hear about my struggles in life, I hope they will be encouraged (to) pursue their own dreams, regardless of their circumstances.

The tag line below Anthony’s e-mail signature is “Power Within Even Without”. What is your tag line? You have been given much and you have much to give. I feel very fortunate to be with you here today as you celebrate this milestone in your lifelong journey of learning, inspiring others, giving your best and receiving immeasurable joy and happiness from serving others. My best wishes to all of you for continued success and happiness as you empower people and enrich their lives. Congratulations, class of 2011.