

David Murray '77
Pomona College Commencement 2012
May 13, 2012

Wow. Okay. Thank you all. Thank you, Bobby.

Good morning graduates, Oxtoby, all of the alumni, my family — I'm so happy they all came. This is an opportunity for us to have a family reunion. I live in Paris with my wife, Valerie, and our two kids, so thanks for the family reunion as well.

I'd like to dedicate this honorary degree to my father, the late Walter Pendleton Murray, and my mother, the late Katherine Hackett Murray. And also to my stepmother, who's here today: Myrna Murray. She came all the way from Middleton, Texas for this. I would also like to thank a gentleman who's no longer with us: Mr. John Payton, for his efforts and guidance as the Claremont Colleges' admissions officer, who initially recruited me to Pomona College from St. Mary's College Prep High School.

Also, Margaret Cohen, who was my piano teacher here, and her husband, who was a great composer, Karl Cohen, for their dedication as well. She helped me to excel through Béla Bartók's creations. And there are some friends here as well — the thing is, about these colleges: I met so many incredible people in the few semesters I was here. One gentleman, Cedric Johnson, from CMC, he's just been honored recently at CMC for his efforts in business. Also, two other friends from CMC: Claris Anthony Bush, who is one of the head economists for the FCC in Washington, and he's here today as well. And also another gentleman from CMC, a friend of mine. Actually, he's more of a brother: attorney Tim Wright — there he is over there. Now this gentleman, he hangs out with people like Bill Clinton. He brought me over to South Africa during the time they were having the clinical trial on a cure for AIDS. He was spearheading it with funds from great African American athletes and he brought me as a music ambassador to entertain his trail. So that was wonderful, and you just never know the kind of people you'll meet here at these colleges. Every time I think about it, it is just amazing how many great people I've met here.

Dr. William Russell, he was the head of the music department. I'm very happy that he was able to have the vision — I think I might have been the only jazz musician here. It's not like now, when people can major in John Coltrane. During that time, you couldn't do that. So I'm very happy for that.

After three semesters of absorbing what Pomona offered, I developed an itch to go to New York, as Bobby said. Arthur Blythe, great saxophonist, had already left, and so I went to Dr. Russell, Professors Crouch and Bradford, who developed some independent studies for my fourth semester. Well, as it worked out, as spring turned to summer I found myself totally immersed in the saxophone studies and I found myself liking playing my horn. My friend told me, Dewey Redman, he said: "Well, you know David, I think you'd better put down the pencil and pick up your saxophone."

All I knew was that the window of opportunity was getting smaller, as things in New York change very quickly, of course. My father and his wife, Myrna, were upset at my decision to



leave Pomona and stay in New York, but I had no chance. After sending them all these records and all these awards, Grammys and this and that, they were like, "Well...okay."

What they really wanted was this Pomona College diploma. Well, as it turned out, it just took a lot longer to receive this, thanks to the support of all these incredibly talented people. I remember once I got on a plane — and I don't travel in first-class all the time but I just happened to be in first-class that day — and I was sitting, writing some music, and a guy started up a conversation with me. He was looking at my music. He finally said his name was Khristopherson and I was like, "Oh, okay." When I mentioned that I went to Pomona, all of a sudden he was my new best friend. These are the kind of people you meet here at Pomona.

I have another friend, James Newton, who actually helped me to get through a very difficult Farley piece because I couldn't play my saxophone for the audition, cause it's not really a classical instrument. I was having a lot of problems with just getting in. James, he coached me — thank you, James, for coaching me through that Farley. I never would have made it.

The thing I think that distinguishes me from other people is my creativity and originality. In each one of you, I imagine that there's something that's different from others. I always try to tell my students to figure out what that is and just feed that, because that's what's gonna take you to a higher place.

I remember once I got a phone call from France. I was in New York. It was this French guy on the line, and he said, "Mr. Murray, this is Jacques Cousteau." I said, "Okay. I've heard of him." (laughter) I was like, "How did he get my number?" As it turned out, he had heard me play the bass clarinet and he said that my bass clarinet was talking to his whales in octo-range. I said, "Oh, okay, well. That makes sense, you know?" Anyway, one of his documentaries you can hear my bass clarinet in, talking to his whales I guess.

Anyway, I just really want to say thank you to all of you out there, family and friends, and happy Mothers' Day, Myrna; my wife, Valerie; Jaime; Janice; all you mothers out there. Thank you very, very much. Thank you, Pomona College.

About David Murray '77

David Murray '77 is an internationally acclaimed jazz saxophonist. He attended Pomona College for two years, studying under Stanley Crouch and Bobby Bradford, before launching his career as a musician and composer. He has founded and led a variety of well-regarded groups, including the David Murray Octet and the World Saxophone Quartet. Recording in the U.S. and abroad, he released more than 150 albums covering a range of genres, from avant-garde jazz to big band, from a Grateful Dead tribute (*Dead Star*, 1996) to opera ("The Blackamoor of Peter the Great," 2004, and "The Sisyphus Revue," 2008). Most recently, he released *David Murray Cuban Ensemble Plays Nat King Cole en Español* (2011), and he is collaborating on an upcoming recording project with Macy Gray. According to jazz critic Gary Giddins, "Few musicians in jazz history have proven more vigorously productive and resourceful than David Murray.... As a tenor saxophonist, he has perfected an instantly recognizable approach to improvisation that even in its freest flights acknowledges the gravity of a tradition he honors more than most." He has been recognized with the Bird Award (1986), a Guggenheim Fellowship (1989) and the Danish Jazzpar Prize (1991), in addition to being named the *Village Voice's* Musician of the Decade (1980) and *Newsday's* Musician of the Year (1993).