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White Coat Much More Than a Change of Attire for Salus University Graduates

Elkins Park, Pa. - As **Stephanie Blair '27AUD** walked across the stage to receive her white coat marking her transition from layperson to healthcare professional, she wasn't just taking those few steps for herself. She was representing generations of her family, who came to the United States from Guyana, South America, in the late 1980s.

"There are not many black women in the profession of audiology and I was taught that if you want to see the change, be the change," said Blair. "Because I'm a first-generation American, receiving the white coat wasn't just for me, it was for my parents and grandparents."

Her mother, Myrna Blair, was there to witness the White Coat ceremony at Salus University. As an immigrant from Guyana who moved to the United States in 1987, she couldn't help but think of her parents when her daughter received the white coat.

"I come from parents who didn't have any formal education, but they instilled in us the value of how important education was to the family," said Blair, who is from Brooklyn, New York and has a master's degree in early child special education and general education. "I know if both of my parents were here today, they would be excited to see their granddaughter reach a high level of excellence in academia."

Bernie Kitzinger, of Sewell, New Jersey, had a similar feeling. Both of his parents recently passed away and didn't get to see their granddaughter, **Jordan Kitzinger '25OT** receive her white coat.

"I laughed because I know as soon as my parents would've seen that white coat, they would have immediately thought she was already a doctor," said Kitzinger. "Jordan has been on the healthcare side of education and taught special needs kids over the past year. This is the next step in that progression and I know she's going to do good things."

The ceremony marked the 20th year in which Salus has celebrated the White Coat, this year with three separate ceremonies throughout the day on Aug. 18, all held in the Hafter Student Community Center on the University's Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, campus. The white coat signifies not only a change in attire, but a significant step forward in students becoming compassionate, skilled, and dedicated healthcare providers.

It also marked the final White Coat ceremony exclusively as Salus, since the University recently signed a formalized merger agreement with Drexel University.

Diana Chuong, OD '14, said she was nearly speechless as she placed the white coat on her brother, **Michael Chuong '27OD**.

"I didn't think I would have this opportunity," said Dr. Chuong, an optometrist at Trend Eyecare in Northern Liberties, Philadelphia. "I wanted him to come here."

The moment wasn't lost on her brother.

"It felt really honorable having her place the white coat on me," said Michael Chuong. "There's a lot of history behind the white coat and with all the support she has given me, I could feel that history. It's really nice to have somebody support me throughout all the stages. I'm really fortunate."

The keynote speaker for the three ceremonies was Salus president **Michael H. Mittelman, OD '80, MPH, MBA, FACHE, FAAO**. He said he wanted to deliver the keynote for several reasons, but notably, since it was the final Salus-exclusive White Coat ceremony, it felt only right to deliver the keynote himself.

Dr. Mittelman offered several suggestions to the students as they began their professional training. Among them: Always keep in mind that becoming a healthcare professional is a privilege; take a moment to say thank you to professors, mentors, family members, and friends who got you to this point; be empathetic and listen to your patients; put the patient at the center of everything you do; remember that healthcare is teamwork and collaboration; and to maintain trust and integrity.

"As you're presented with your white coat today, remember that it is not just another piece of clothing, it's a symbol of your commitment and integrity and the higher calling you have answered: caring for others," said Dr. Mittelman. "The journey ahead will have its share of challenges, but I am absolutely certain you will make a remarkable impact on the lives of those who are fortunate enough to encounter you along the way."

Sonia Bassily, OD '97, also placed the white coat on her daughter, Julia Marotta '25OT. Although her daughter has chosen occupational therapy and not optometry like her mother, Bassily said she had a tremendous amount of pride that her daughter would be attending her mother's alma mater.

"I've seen the impact OT has had on my family personally and the lives of children and adults alike," said Marotta, from Matawan, New Jersey. "It was an honor, and really sentimental, to have my mom place the white coat on me and I really appreciated it."

Mackenzie Haley '25SLP said she was a little nervous she was going to trip walking across the stage to receive her white coat, but that didn't happen.

"It was really exciting," said Haley, whose parents Denise and Rick were so overcome with pride and emotion that they found it difficult to put into words after the ceremony. "I had experiences in high school where I was working with kids who were non-verbal, so after being able to hear them say their first words, that's what made me want to be an SLP."

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About Salus University

Salus University, founded as the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in 1919, today is a diversified, globally recognized professional academic center of learning that offers a wide range of degree programs in the professions of Optometry, Audiology, Physician Assistant, Blindness and Low Vision Studies, Biomedicine, Occupational Therapy, Speech-Language Pathology and Orthotics and Prosthetics. Salus operates three clinical facilities in Philadelphia and Montgomery counties that provide highly specialized vision, hearing and balance, and speech-language pathology. The University has more than 1,200 students, and more than 14,000 alumni worldwide. For more information, please visit www.salus.edu.