

**Suffolk University College of Arts & Sciences Commencement**  
**Sunday, May 19, 2019**  
**Rockland Trust Bank Pavilion**  
**Commencement Speaker**  
**Ruth E. Carter**  
**Oscar-winning *Black Panther* costume designer**

Wow, I can finally call myself Dr. Ruth. Thank you for this wonderful, wonderful honor and hello, Suffolk University Boston, Massachusetts. Distinguished faculty and staff, parents, grandparents, aunties, family, friends and even the haters, look at the Class of 2019. I'm excited. I'm excited to celebrate with you this momentous day. Thank you to the College of Arts and Sciences for this invitation, Acting Provost Royo, Dean Toyoda, and especially Professor Bellinger who put my name forward. We go way back. By also having me here today, you've helped me coordinate seeing my mom for Mother's Day in my home state of Massachusetts.

Let me get on with imparting some words of wisdom because I know most of you are probably hung over. Others are zoning out, wondering what will happen on tonight's episode of *Game of Thrones*. And the rest of you can't wait to get to the mimosas.

The world beyond college can be just as crazy as moving into the dorms here at Suffolk. Your career decisions may change as you learn to figure out what you like to do and what you don't like to do. It may take a while for you to figure it out. This Oscar win for Marvel's *Black Panther* was not an overnight success. Let me tell you, I've been doing this costume design gig for a long time, long before you all were born, and long before they invented Spanx.

I really do applaud you, graduates, for being in these seats. When I was a student at Hampton University, I almost did not graduate. I was a few credits short, and a few dollars shy of my rent, so I decided it was time to go. But before leaving campus, I wanted to say goodbye to my professor and mentor, Linda Bolton Smith. She would not say goodbye. Instead, she offered me room and board to finish out the semester. She was an incredible example of a black woman and showed me the discipline of being an artist by waking up at five in the morning and devoting the first two hours of her day to her writing. She taught me that to be an artist means to remain passionate, studying not only your craft, but your culture and yourself, seeking out the unique details that add color and pattern and texture to your stories. Linda exposed me to the famous artists like Wole Soyinka, Alice Walker, Romare Bearden, and assured me that I could stand side by side with any of them. No matter what stage in your career or life, stay connected to your professors, mentors, and colleagues who support you. Seek out people who believe in your talents and can see you before you can see yourself. After Hampton, I went back home to Springfield, Mass. Yes, that's right. Some of you might be moving back home, too. If you are, you can buy mom and dad the mimosas at brunch. Back in my hometown, I was accepted for an internship in a local theatre.

During this time, I was studying about design opportunities around the nation. The woman who hired me for my internship said: Ruth, you've got to focus on doing this. You have to pursue costume design. So, I got in my '89 Volkswagen Rabbit, which had no airbags and no AC, and I had to roll the windows down like this, and I headed west.

I was awarded an internship in New Mexico. I drove across the entire country to do a season at the Santa Fe Opera. Then, I decided to head to the Pacific Ocean. There, in Los Angeles, I connected with friends that I also went to college with at Hampton, and one of my friends worked in the film industry. This was such an adventurous time with friends and supporting each other and figuring out Hollywood. Graduates, take an adventure. Take chances and be unpredictable. You have your whole life to live by the book. If I hadn't have taken a chance all those years ago, I wouldn't be standing before you today. So, take the chance.

I began freelancing for Lula Washington's Dance Company in South Central Los Angeles doing costumes for a show that was inspired by the music of Stevie Wonder. One night, that same college friend came to see the show and brought Spike Lee. When she introduced me, he said you can do the same thing you do for theatre for film, and he encouraged me to expand my talents. I would go on to costume design for graduate student film projects at USC, and it furthered my training.

Then one morning, I got a call. I answered, hello. He said: Ruth. I said: yes. He said: Ruth, this is the man of your dreams. I said: Denzel? No, this is Spike. I want you to be the costume designer for my next film. Starting with *School Daze*, Spike and I have collaborated on 14 films. He showed me bravery through his filmmaking. From *Radio Raheem* to *Malcolm X*, we were making art by any means necessary. He pushed me to remain conscious that these articles of clothing were not only costumes, but also garments of protest and symbols of truth. *Do the Right Thing* is archived in the Library of Congress because the message still resonates today as it did in 1989. Working with Spike challenges our creative boundaries. Between researching the life of Malcolm X, beginning at the Department of Corrections right here in Massachusetts where he was held, to his pilgrimage we experienced in Egypt. Not only did I learn to find my own unique signature, but I also learned to use my art in service of something bigger. This then turned into my first Oscar nomination for *Malcolm X*. No matter whether you're in journalism, finance, psychology, art history, pursue your life work in service of something bigger and you'll start to understand your purpose.

For about 10 years I worked bicoastal, creating New York stories and broad comedies until I landed a gig with the late great director, John Singleton. From his doorstep we projected a spotlight on the LA experience. Not only did we explore the gang culture of Los Angeles in *Baby Boy*, but also with *Rosewood*, we made filmmaking a family affair. His intellect about movie making, film, and art, and his spirit and kindness towards me and others is what made him a special person. Take from his example and don't waste your time. John Singleton knew the stories he wanted to tell while he was sitting in the same exact seats where you are today. He left his graduation running so he could get on with telling his stories, but couldn't finish because he left us too soon, and he had so

much story to tell. You have all the resources at your disposal than any time in history. A great foundation at Suffolk University and incredible life experience in Boston. Take from John Singleton's example and start doing what it is you want to do in this life. Start today.

After doing these film projects, my passion for studying African American history and literature was reignited. People might assume I became a costume designer because I like the fashions of Chanel and Dior, McQueen, Fendi, Louis Vuitton. But no. But now, it was Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, James Baldwin and so many others. Those were my designers. Those playwrights and poets raised me up with their rich stories and made me come alive. They lit a passion in me to create and showed me that costume design is being artistic and visionary and inspired. So, I started to collect a personal library of books and photos, artifacts on African American history and culture. That's when I was approached by Debbie Allen and Steven Spielberg to do *Amistad*. The work on *Amistad* was a culmination of all that study. But because it became a place of passion, it did not feel like work. Rather, it felt like a continued purpose in telling stories that allow us to know ourselves better. This helped me earn my second Oscar nomination. Yes, be a student of your passion. Yes, you are graduating, but you will continue to be a student of your passion. Throughout my career, I remained a student of people, storytelling, history telling, a student of design and art, studying my script, my craft, and myself.

After *Amistad*, it would be 21 years before I'd see my next nomination. That's the entire span of your lives. During that time, I learned about self-validation and to try to stay true to my calling and my purpose. When there's no outside source giving you validation and a feeling of worthiness, you have to look inward. I had to visualize and define what it meant to be a costume designer for myself. I realized whether or not the film did well in the box office or became a cultural classic, I was in control of the art I produced. I wanted to make sure I brought the best of myself because people will notice when you do well, and they may offer you a role of a lifetime. No matter the challenges I faced, the hardships I endured, personal tragedies I went through, heartaches, heartbreaks, when it came back to my work, the artistry, the creativity, the design...when I would come back to my foundation and my purpose, everything felt like it was right. When things got difficult, I would say my mantras to myself, and you may do the same. Define what it is that you are. And when times get difficult, you'll learn to rely on that foundation and come back to your purpose.

When Marvel called, I thought why me? I had never done a super hero film. You know, Marvel is like the CIA. As you enter, the doors lock behind you. I was in a meeting with the producers Nate Moore, and director Ryan Coogler, and I was having trouble bringing up my design concepts on Dropbox. But of course, you just can't log into Marvel. You need to get your eye scanned, fingerprinted, blood drawn. That's when Ryan says to me: Ruth, I'm so happy you are here. That put me at ease. I really cherish that moment. I felt like I had auditioned for *Black Panther* when Ryan saw *Malcolm X* as a young boy with his father. From Ryan's perspective, between *Malcolm X*, *Amistad*, *The Butler*, *Selma*, and (Thurgood) *Marshall*, I had been designing super heroes.

My work on *Black Panther* in many ways has been a career-defining, full circle experience for me. That journey of immersion in myself into the beauty and depth of so many ancient African cultures such as the Lesotho, the Maasai, the Himba, Zulu, Turkana, Tuareg, Samai, Zuri, Dogon, and many others. And the opportunity to weave their cultural stories into the costumes was an incredible honor. All these traditions merging and were presented in their regality at the Warrior Falls. And the presence of knowing the impact that this film could have on the world and for the culture, and then it actually piling in comparison to what it really did, \$1.3 billion worldwide. Marvel may have created the first black super hero, but through costume design, we turned him into an African king. Everything I have learned and been through set me up for that experience. I have been designing costumes for the African American narrative that took place during a time when black people were either slaves, relegated to be the help, or fighting for their rights and justice, and here, Marvel desired the look and design of the film to be authentically African. Marvel encouraged me to fully exercise my talent, imagination in merging the traditional with the contemporary, creating the Afrofuture. Through the costumes it was an honor to showcase the merging of tradition and royalty and to reimagine beauty and the empowered way women can look and lead onscreen. It inspired me to reflect on my entire body of work on the artistry and the messages in all the costumes that I have designed through the many years and realize overall, my contribution to Afrofuture. I was showcasing a point of view, the African culture and diaspora and using technology, intertwining it with imagination. Together, over the many films with the many actors, directors, cast, and crew, we presented possibility. We presented Afrofuture. I had found my voice and understood my purpose. The work on *Black Panther* was about a director who believed in me and saw my role in telling this story.

Graduates, the same may happen for you. It's about taking a chance. It's about being in service of something bigger. It's about not wasting any more time telling this version of our story. It's about being a student of your passion, and it's about being in control of the quality of art you present so you can tell your story your way.

The night I received the Oscar as the first African American in costume design, when I was walking off the stage, I realized the door for other people who had dreamed of this had been flung wide open. It made every step forward and backward, the ups and the downs, the highs and the lows, all worth it. My journey continues as I travel from Wakanda to Zamunda in *Coming to America 2*. So, stay tuned. But graduates, your journey starts today.

Graduates, I hope you were taking notes because life is always testing you. This afternoon, as you raise your glass to toast yourselves, remember to stay in touch with your mentors. Take a chance. Be in service of something bigger. Don't waste time. Be a student of your passion. Be in control of the quality of work and art you present. You can write your own story. Today is the first page. Make it a bestseller. Congratulations, Suffolk University and the class of 2019.