

AME school Wilberforce University cancels debt for 2020, 2021 grads

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [June 30, 2021](#) issue



Rodman Allen hugs his mother after commencement at Wilberforce University on May 29. (Courtesy photo)

There are usually lots of cheers and applause at university commencements.

But 2020 and 2021 graduates of Wilberforce University, a school affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, had an extra reason to celebrate during their May 29 ceremony in Wilberforce, Ohio.

University president Elfred Anthony Pinkard announced that any debts graduates still owed to the historically Black university had been forgiven.

“Because you have shown that you are capable of doing work under difficult circumstances, because you represent the best of your generation, we wish to give you a fresh start,” said Pinkard. “So therefore the Wilberforce University board of trustees has authorized me to forgive any debt. Your accounts have been cleared and you don’t owe Wilberforce anything. Congratulations.”

As soon as Pinkard said the words “forgive any debt,” the masked students started screaming, shouting, and jumping, prompting him to smile and laugh before he continued his surprise announcement, which was streamed live on Wilberforce’s YouTube channel.

When Pinkard added that “accounts have been cleared” there were more cheers, jumps, and hand waving among the students in black robes and green and gold stoles.

In a statement on its website, the university said that its 166 new alumni received a total of more than \$375,000 in debt forgiveness, supported by scholarships from the United Negro College Fund, Jack and Jill, and other institutions that aided students in the spring and fall semesters of 2020 and the spring of 2021.

The statement noted that all students also benefited from the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, established through the CARES Act. In particular, that financial assistance had previously helped the students whose balances due to the school would have prevented them from registering for their fall classes in 2020.

One student spoke of the difference the debt forgiveness will make for him in the years ahead.

“I couldn’t believe it when he said it,” Rodman Allen, now a 2021 alumnus, said in a statement. “It’s a blessing. I know God will be with me. I’m not worried. I can use that money and invest it into my future.”

During the ceremony, the university also awarded posthumous doctorate degrees to civil rights leaders Fannie Lou Hamer and Medgar Evers.

Wilberforce, the oldest private historically Black school operated and owned by African Americans, was founded in 1856. — Religion News Service