"Rooting for YOU!," by Dr. Chris Jones

To every graduate—from Pre-K to PhDs, and everyone grinding in between (including those who've earned your GED and those who dropped out and are afraid to go back but want to – I see you. I celebrate you. I'm clapping for you like so many clapped for me.

When I graduated, it was more than a ceremony. It was a moment full of people's prayers, sacrifices, and second jobs. It was about making good on what so many before me didn't get the chance to finish. And now, watching more of us cross these stages—kids, cousins, grown folks going back for their degrees – I feel nothing but pride.

I'm a graduate of Watson Chapel High School, Morehouse College, and MIT. It was a challenging road, I often wanted to give up, but it has been worth every struggle.

This message is for every student who carried the weight of more than just homework. Who showed up when they didn't feel seen. Who stayed late, worked extra, helped family, and still walked that stage like a boss. You earned that cap. You earned that hood. You earned that certificate. And whether you realize it or not, you are a role model for those to come.

This message is for the ones who took the long road, who paused and came back, who finished in their own time. It's for the ones going to trade school, into the military, into the workforce, into healing spaces. We don't all take the same path—but **every step forward counts**.

I see young leaders, future engineers, doctors, barbers, nurses, welders, ministers, artists, educators, and business owners. I see our communities rising through you. I see our families smiling because of you.

And for the graduates in Little Rock, Pine Bluff, Conway, and every corner of this state: know this—**you did that.** Against the odds. In spite of everything. You rose!

Keep going. Keep building. Keep believing in your own brilliance. And when it gets hard (because it will), remember where you come from. **We are rooting for you. Always.**

Congrats, Class of 2025. You did more than graduate. You made a statement. And you are now a shining example.