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4A Thursday, April 24, 2003

# Colleges choose famous faces to speak at commencements

By Bryna Zumer KRT CAMPUS

As president of the senior class at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, Jessica Zerges will get to have dinner with this year's commencement speaker, popular children's book author Judy Blume.

"Because it's a women's college and so many of us read her works growing up, it's going to be interesting to hear her voice now that we're grown up," said Zerges, a history and politics major.

Blume has written 22 novels, including classics such as "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret" and "Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing."

Zerges was on the committee that polls the senior class for their choice of speaker and decides who to invite.

"This year we were very lucky," she said. A good commencement speaker should be someone who "not only has national recognition but someone who also feels like they have something important to say to the graduates," Zerges said.

Mount Holyoke's choice of Blume reflects the diversity of this year's batch of commencement speakers, which features fewer politicians than last year. Graduation speakers in 2002 included President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, Attorney General John Ashcroft and Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge.

However, some universities said their choices do not reflect a global sensibility.

Former President Bill Clinton will speak at two commencements, at Toulouge College in Mississippi and at a joint commencement between Syracuse University and State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

"I'd assume with the world the way it is today, the topic of war will come up," said Toulouge communications specialist Chip Washington. "It will be very interesting to

hear his take on international relations."

At Maine College of Art, the students who chose artist Yoko Ono as their speaker this year "were most interested in her because she's a pioneering artist, but also because of her role as a global citizen," said Kathy Mills, the school's director of public relations. "I think that did play in their decision."

Some colleges, on the other hand, wanted to avoid speakers who would address the tension and uncertainty of the current international climate.

Framingham State College in Massachusetts, for example, has chosen children's writer Jack Prelutsky, known for poetry books such as "The New Kid on the Block."

"You have so many downs with the war and economy and everything, it's important to have someone with kind of an upbeat personality," said commencement committee chairwoman Martha Flintner.

Many universities do not know yet exactly what their speakers will talk about, however.

"You sort of get all the nuts and bolts together in the last two or three weeks," explained Patrick Dilger, director of public affairs at Southern Connecticut State University, whose senior class will hear actress Sigourney Weaver speak this year.

Zerges said she does not know what Blume will speak about, but thinks "a lot of people are just sort of hoping to hear advice on how to take the next step into the real world."

Many colleges say chance and having the right connections play the biggest part in booking famous speakers.

At Toulouge College, President Beverly Wade Hogan is a friend of Clinton and was

able to contact him.

"There was an opportunity in his very schedule," Washington said. "This will be the biggest thing that has happened to this school in terms of commencement."

An alumnus of Wake Forest University in North Carolina and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg agreed to speak at the university this year.

"I think he'll be interesting in that he's the mayor of New York City at an extraordinary time in history," Wake Forest spokesman Kevin Cox said.

The announcement of famous speaker at commencement can attract students who would otherwise not attend the event.

"A couple of students were not interested (in commencement) until they found out who was coming," senior class president Elen Dayaa, a communication major, said.

"They said, 'Are you kidding? It's (Jack) Prelutsky? We're definitely going.'"

Some speakers seem as excited to speak their audience is to hear them.

Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo will speak at Stanford University, personally called Stanford president John Hennessy thank him for the invitation.

"He went out of his way to make a special call," said Jeff Wachtel, senior assistant president. "It would be fair to say that never hesitated in his eagerness."

At Mount Holyoke, "there was sort of a sense of mutual excitement" between Blume and the students, Zerges said. "I think in general you want someone who knows your school and wants to be there."

"Because it's a women's college and so many of us read her works growing up, it's going to be interesting to hear her voice now that we're grown up."

— Jessica Zerges  
Mount Holyoke College senior class president on commencement speaker Judy Blume

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**'Idol' winner Clarkson tops album charts**

NEW YORK (AP) — Kelly Clarkson didn't have to wait a lifetime to reach the top of the album chart — she made it there in just one week.

The "American Idol" winner's first album, "Thankful," debuted at No. 1, selling more than 297,000 copies during its first week in stores, according to industry figures released Wednesday.

The album includes new mixes of "A Moment Like This" and "Before Your Love," the two songs Clarkson recorded after she won the Fox singing competition last year.

Rapper 50 Cent had two entries in the top five: "The New Breed," a three-song compact disc/DVD that sold 246,000 copies in its first week to reach the No. 2 spot, and "Get Rich or Die Tryin'," which came in fifth and has now sold more than 4.2 million copies.

Fleetwood Mac's first album of new material in 15 years, "Say You Will," debuted at No. 3, selling nearly 218,000 copies.

Darryl Worley's "Have I Forgotten?" came in at No. 4 with 214,000 copies sold.

The title track, a pro-life anthem, is the No. 1 country single in the country.

Last week's top album Godsmack's "Faceless" dropped to No. 13, with about 110,000 copies sold.

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