



**TRINITY WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**  
TRINITY COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

**Remarks for the Fall 2011 New Student Convocation**  
*August 23, 2011*

**President Patricia McGuire**

***“A Light of Hope Across the River”***  
***“Una luz al otro lado del rio”<sup>1</sup>***

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My title this morning is a quotation from a beautiful phrase that one of our new students wrote in her admissions essay, the idea that a higher education is “*una luz al otro lado del rio*,” “a light of hope on the other side of the river.” You have launched your journey well here at Trinity and we celebrate the end of your orientation week this morning.

Who are you, our new students joining the Trinity community in the College of Arts and Sciences this year? At each new student convocation, it is my custom to tell you a little bit about yourselves. I have some statistics about you, and then, more important, I have a sociological and philosophical profile about you that I draw from the essays you wrote with your college applications. I quote from these essays in this talk, but not in a way that identifies you personally. Since we’ve just met, I have not had the opportunity to ask your permission to use your material, so I quote you anonymously to protect your identity, but I give you full credit for your thoughts and words.

*Where are you from?*

47% of you are DC residents, with 38% from Maryland and 7% from Virginia. But you also hail from fourteen other states including: California, Colorado, Delaware, Connecticut, Illinois, Kansas, Massachusetts, North Carolina, New Jersey, Nevada, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico and Texas.

Beyond immediate residency, though, you are a very international class. In addition to being born in 19 states in the U.S.A., you also have roots in Ethiopia, Ghana, Iraq, Burundi, Cameroon,

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<sup>1</sup> A new Trinity first year student wrote this phrase in her admissions essay. This phrase and all quotations in italics in this address come from the admissions essays for the Fall 2011 entering class of new students in CAS. The quotations appear anonymously in this paper to protect the identity of the students.

Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Bangladesh, Bulgaria, Jamaica and the Philippines.

*What languages do you speak?*

You speak 17 different languages including Amharic, Bengali, Bulgarian, Creole, French, English, Ito, Macedonian, Oromo, Polish, Serbian, Somali, Spanish, Tamil, Twi, Urdu and Vietnamese.

*What religions do you profess?*

You are Catholic and Christian, Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist and many other religions, and some professing no religion.

*What are your demographics?*

You are 75% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 4% Caucasian with other races and nationalities in the mix.

You range in age from 17 to 40.

If we call out for Brittany, Ashley, Courtney or Jasmine, quite a few of you will turn your heads, since those are the most popular names in this class.

You have come to Trinity to study Nursing, Biology, Education, Criminal Justice, Business and many other subjects. If you are like other students who have come before you, it's quite likely that you will change your thoughts about your major program once or several times, perhaps more. You are here to receive a complete liberal education, so don't obsess about your major just yet --- you will miss out on so many learning opportunities if you become too narrowly focused too soon. You'll have plenty of time to specialize.

You are mothers and military personnel, dancers and volleyball champions, artists and singers and Girl Scouts and soccer players and dedicated volunteers and aspiring lawyers, nurses, doctors and business executives. You have seen horrors in sugar cane factories in the Dominican Republic and fled oppression in Ethiopia and poverty in Jamaica. You have danced in a Bollywood show and earned your Girl Scout Gold Awards.

You write, *"I am just a teenage girl from Brooklyn looking for success in life."*

You would like to have dinner with a remarkable group of people ranging from Oprah Winfrey to Harriet Tubman to Neil Armstrong to Anne Frank to Sonia Sotomayor to Nelson Mandela and even God, himself. One student wrote that she wants to have dinner with Alfred Einstein, Jesus and Adolph Hitler, and she explains:

*"I want to ask Jesus, is there not one woman who you favored more than any other? Is there any woman that if you had the chance to marry you would take it? I mean it might just be the fact*

*that I am only human that I ask this question but I would really like to know.... [Regarding Hitler] I would like to try to understand where Hitler learned to hate...why he did not use his talents and smarts to help people instead of killing people..."*

**You cherish the strong women in your lives --- the mothers, grandmothers, sisters, aunts and cousins who have taught you how to grow, how to persist and sustain the will to be successful.**

This student writes about the ways in which her mother helped her overcome negativity about a disability:

*"Have you ever lived in a world where all you heard were the words 'can't' or 'won't' from most people? Well you know how there is always that one person there to inspire and uplift you...for me that person is my mom. When I was little, I sometimes felt ashamed of being different because people would stare at me and make assumptions about me, but my mom taught me to embrace and take pride in the fact that I was different, because being different is what makes me special and unique...She taught me never to let anything or anyone defeat me...that "cannot" is not a part of my vocabulary."*

This student writes of the lessons she learned from her grandmother in Ethiopia:

*"My grandmother changed my life forever..Growing up in Ethiopia I lived in a bad environment. There was poverty and struggle everywhere and my family especially struggled tremendously. The neighborhood that I lived in was not a safe environment and it did not have enough opportunities for me to get proper education. So I decided to live with my grandmother...She made a promise to me that while she is in this world she will make sure I get education. My grandmother provided everything for me to get a good education.."*

Another writes of her mother's inspiration:

*"My mother has taught me to be a strong, astute, independent woman....My mother always works hard to give my family a better life than what she had.."*

This student writes of her debt of gratitude to the mother who adopted her after her biological mother passed away:

*"I know my [adopted] mom saved my life because if she had not taken me in, I have no idea what my life would be like now....[with her] I had peace as a child and I was not longer living in constant fear of my biological mother. I ....recognize now the sacrifice that my mom made by taking in two little girls who did not belong to her, but she did it out of the love in her heart. She reorganized her entire life just so that I could have life....I would like to repay her for what she has done. I believe I can best demonstrate my gratitude for her with the life I live and the decisions I make..."*

**Some of you have children of your own, and you reflect those same strong leadership qualities you admire in your mothers.**

This student writes about the day she gave birth to her son:

*"When I saw him for the first time I decided I wanted better for him. I planned his whole life and he wasn't even an hour old. I wanted to provide for him and wanted him to have everything. I decided I wanted to go back to school and pursue nursing... the experience of being a mother has affected me in so many ways. I never thought in a million years that I would love someone so much in my life and sacrifice any and everything to make sure they had better..."*

The experience of teenage mothers makes you especially determined to earn your college degrees:

*"Graduating college is my goal because I want to show people that just because I was a statistic[teen pregnancy] doesn't hold me back and it doesn't mean that I won't do anything in life. It'll also show I'm not depending on welfare to provide for me and my child. It shows the government that I am trying to make my own money and I won't depend on them for the rest of my life...I will be another example to my fellow teen mothers that we can make it. That even though we're making bottles at an early age we can still get our homework done. I am a role model for us parents that show we are strong, we can do it, we don't have to give up because we made a mistake and it's not the end of our journey... I will use my haters along the way as motivators... I've been talked about among various people for having a baby at 17, from the doctors at delivery the nurses after, people seeing me push my stroller in the streets on my way to school, students and my own family. I am determined to prove all of them wrong..."*

This student was the mother for her two younger brothers after their mother's death:

*"Raising two young men taught me patience, selflessness and to appreciate the smaller things in my day-to-day life. None of which I'd practiced before. I had to transform my life and ideals to be a good example for them."*

**You have already triumphed over all kinds of adversity, whether homelessness or physical disabilities or poverty or prejudice or violence:**

This student has known homelessness and the trials that come with a mother using drugs:

*"My mother used drugs my whole life. She never had her own house, let alone me having my own room. I had to move around a lot...I learned at the age of eight to be more mature about what was happening to me and realized what I had to do in life to be happy and make it somewhere. I knew I had to go to school and try hard to learn as much as I could....My mother helped me to become the person that I am today. Everyday I looked at my mother and I knew with all my heart that I could not live my life as she did. I was able to observe through her what I didn't want my life to become...I am going to make it somewhere in life...I know that the first*

*step to achieve my goal is to get a good education. I am going to go to college and be very successful. College is not just a want for me, it's more of a need."*

Some of you have suffered homelessness, lost parents to HIV/AIDS, witnessed violence at young ages.

One student writes about the murder of her aunt, uncle and cousin in a crime that made headlines in the Washington region but was a terrible personal tragedy for the family. She writes of the need to be strong in the aftermath of such a terrible event.

This student wrote of her early life in another country:

*"By the time I was eleven years of age, my life was a lonely roller coaster, traveling through the dark alleys with scary old monsters trying to get at me. Life was a struggle: being molested at an early age by senior men, being ill-treated and verbally abused by people I thought cared about me, I was accused of stealing thousands of dollars, had my life threatened by a witchcraft worker, and had a mom who does not know how to show love and affection... I was determined not to let my struggles keep me down, I was going to find my happiness again..."*

### **You have known challenges, fears, injustice and success as members of immigrant families:**

This student writes about the devastating news that her father was going to be deported:

*"My parents came to the United States because [our country] was in a civil war. They hoped for a new beginning, the American Dream. My parents wanted a better future for themselves and their children...My parents are striving to provide their children with opportunities they never had. [when I saw the deportation notice for my father] I was stunned and frightened. It was as if they were treating a human being like a piece of luggage...The experience made me reflect on what I wanted to do in life. I want to help people like my father and change the laws in this country. Furthering my education and studying subjects such as law, politics, and sociology will help me to accomplish my goal...I want to be able to maintain and see that human dignity and equal opportunity are accessible to all."*

Many of you realize that your parents immigrated to make your lives better:

*"My father was born in [a Caribbean nation] and came from a poor family. He was raised by his grandfather in one of the poorest parishes in [that country]. He dropped out of school after primary school to work and help support his grandfather. My dad didn't want the same for his children; as a result we migrated to America when I was three years old."*

This student captures the experiences of many:

*"It was difficult for me when I came to this country (the U.S.) because I left all my family in my country... I faced a new way to live, a new tradition, language and some societal problems. The first days that I spent out of my country, I felt desperate and sad...I heard the people in the*

*streets trying to talk to me but I couldn't speak to them because I didn't speak English....This experience helped me a lot because I decided to learn the language..."*

And another:

*"Acculturation is not only a lengthy word, it is a long process that I am experiencing... I am starting to adapt to the American diet, the way of life, and most of all, I am still learning the language..."*

And this student writes of working through the difficulties of immigration to get a good education:

*"Moving from [a central American country] to US just before I was thirteen transformed my life; it caused many changes, good and bad, and also brought a lot of confusion to my life... It was very shocking for me to have to move, leaving my grandmother and friends. It was harder for me to learn English and complete drop my accent... [but] I considered myself lucky for getting the educational opportunity that I could not get in [my country]..."*

And another voice:

*"When I was growing up, my country... was under a war. My childhood life was tough and all we did was move from place to place to find a safe place. Fortunately, I had the chance of coming to the United States. This country gave me lots of opportunities but mainly education."*

**You have had some very interesting professional and life experiences:**

*"In 2006 I learned to drive a truck... I'm not talking about a little ol' pickup truck or an SUV. I'm talking about a truck with 18 wheels, 10 gears and up to 80,000 pounds! You may think it isn't a big deal; people drive big trucks all the time. Well, I'm here to tell you, it IS a big deal. The hard work and determination it takes to learn to drive a truck is beyond anything you can imagine."*

*"Having grown up in Eastern Europe, I have always wanted to work as a diplomat. I liked this major mainly because it includes a lot of traveling and exploring different countries. Learning new languages and meeting new people is something really amazing.... I know five languages: Bulgarian, English, Serbian, Macedonian and French."*

**Your experiences have taught you to speak out about the deep problems in our communities:**

*"I've lost many loved ones and friends due to gun violence in my community. When outsiders visit my neighborhood they often feel threatened, uncomfortable and scared. Gun violence is a major problem that the government should take more time to focus on...."*

Like other students, this writer rejects the idea of becoming "just another statistic" in her community:

*“As a young female living in the Washington metropolitan area, most females are characterized as having babies at the age of 14 and up....Many of the females here barely complete all four years of high school. My parents always taught me to be better than them and not make the same mistake....I’m excited about going to college not only to please my parents but because I don’t want to be another statistic.”*

And this perspective:

*“I want to be a child advocacy lawyer. I grew up without a father in my life so I know how that feels. I want to help and reach out to children who are just like me out there who grew up in a single parent home.”*

And on the larger global stage:

*“As the world experiences climate change, my generation has been responsible in fighting for change. My parents’ generation continues to hold the major decision-making cards with issues as sensitive as environmental protection, my generation is showing true hunger for protection.”*

And this student appreciates the examples of strong, courageous leadership:

*“What if Harriet Tubman had revolted against her master and consequently never lived to lead so many slaves to Freedom? I would not be free today. What if Susan B. Anthony...had changed her goal from achieving voting rights for women by means of a Constitutional amendment to torching all of the voting facilities in the United States? I would not be able to vote today. What if Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had let the influence of his time persuade him to leave his non-violence principles and take a more radical approach to justice? I would still be fighting the war of segregation today...”*

This student writes with a great deal of passion about the injustices perpetrated by current immigration policy. Her sister, who is not a citizen, could not receive college scholarships even though she is very smart. The student, who is, herself, a U.S. citizen, writes this about education and immigration policy:

*“Being a Latina and seeing my sister’s dream get crushed made me angry, but it also inspired me to do better. I have realized that a simple document acknowledging my citizenship opens up unlimited opportunities, none of which I can take for granted. Her complications with trying to get an education exposed me to the true struggles of immigrants. In a nation of immigrants, it seems that the potential contributions of immigrants still have not yet been fully realized or appreciated. What is a true American? Our nation is built on immigration, beginning with the immigration of the Europeans. How can someone really judge who belongs here or not? Knowing that my sister’s academic achievements were ignored just because she did not have a piece of paper with a special number and stamp upsets me, but more importantly it inspires me to take advantage of the opportunity I have to pursue a higher education. As a citizen, I have access to so many opportunities that undocumented students are denied. However, I feel that my opportunity is una luz al otro lado del rio: a light of hope on the other side of the river. I will*

*study hard and graduate, and then use my education to ensure other students in the same position as my sister will be able to make their own dreams of higher education come true. I hope to make a difference in our nation and help it fulfill its claims of being a land of opportunity. As a descendent of the Mayans, and knowing their struggle with Spanish Imperialism and how they fought it, it inspires me to prove that if my descendents can pull through, then so can I.”*

**You have a lot of thoughts about how readily available technology distinguishes your generation from your parents, and your view of technology is not all favorable:**

*“In the '70's when my parents were raised, the beginning of much of the basic technology that we depend on so much today was just becoming popularized. Things such as color television, video games, microwaves and printers were new.... These things are currently all considered basic amenities in a household; however, during my parents' generation, people were not solely dependent on them because they knew how to work without them. When a household could not afford a microwave or a printer, people knew how to work around them. There were no excuses for why something was not done. People knew how to cook food on the stove when there was no microwave; how to write and do research without the internet; how to have fun outside without a joystick and a television. Technology in my generation allows people to have something to blame instead of taking responsibility for their own actions and mistakes....it is a fact that technology allows things to be done the easy way. However, it also allows things that are done the hard way to be forgotten therefore causing this generation to be metaphorically lost in situations where they have to be without certain luxuries.”*

Or, put another way:

*“Technology has really been a blessed curse for this generation. We depend on it so it has become a crutch for us...”*

**You have made a deliberate choice to come to Trinity because you know that a college degree will change your life immeasurably, give you something that will inspire others in your families or communities to follow:**

*“I was raised on the hard streets of Northeast Washington, DC. ... Living on the streets filled with crime, I played hop scotch and double-dutch, never seeing the danger within my neighborhood. I thought it was cool seeing drug dealers and gang bangers...However, one day I saw the police take away all the people who I thought were cool....It was then that I said to myself I wanted to do better than this. I made a promise to myself that school was going to be my first priority....At the same time, I thought I had only one out of a million chances to go to college because of living in my community. People who live in my community do not graduate from high school... They say school is a waste of time... I do not want to be like the people in my community, I want to make a better life for myself. I am a determined young woman. I see myself in twenty years being a partner in a law firm.”*

*“Education is the only accident-proof way to get that luxurious life people dream of...”*



**Some of you are older than your classmates, women who have experienced a bit of life, perhaps transferring to Trinity after earning credits at other colleges and universities. Your personal journeys now inform this important new step in your careers:**

*“The personal experience that has changed my life for the better would be when I decided to join the military. I made the decision to join the military because I wanted something different. The military has given me the tools to succeed in life and also to become independent.”*

**You have a vision for how your life’s work will change the world:**

*“...I want to be recognized for establishing an all girls’ Christian school for needy and less privileged children in the West African country of Ghana. I want to teach young girls the value of education and Christianity. The Ashanti families in Ghana usually send their sons to school while the girls are left at home to do the house work. When I build this school in Ghana I will give the Ashanti girls the ability to reach new heights... I will be described as a blessing to the girls of the Ashanti region...”*

*“My goal is to become a successful registered nurse, specifically in the area of pediatrics. The greatest reward in my life would be to be an advocate in healthcare for children...I am a Haitian-American who will be the first in my family to graduate with a post-secondary degree..”*

*“I have traveled and seen things I never imagined...The most memorable trip was when I went to Nicaragua at the age of ten...I saw for the first time what real poverty was...I witnessed children who should be in school working in harsh conditions.. From then on I promised myself that someday I was going to help in some way to help rid the world of poverty...I want to help give these children the same opportunities as I have had.”*

In this disposition of service to the profound needs of others in our world, you are echoing and emulating the mission and example of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, those courageous women who founded Trinity more than a century ago to educate women to be of service to our world. You never met them, but they are surely smiling with great joy upon you. You are the latest witness of their dream, the fulfillment of their vision. With the light of this education, you will become the beacons of hope for others across the rivers of life.

Welcome, Trinity’s latest generation of women who will lead the way for others!