

Remarks for the Senior Luncheon – Green Class of 2010
May 21, 2010

President Patricia McGuire

Senior luncheon is one of the sweetest traditions of Trinity. This is the day before the big weekend, the moment when we come together to enjoy each other's company once more before the hectic rush of commencement weekend. This is a time to look back fondly with gratitude for college friendships, with the startling realization of so much learning that has occurred, with the bittersweet memories of student days leavened by eagerness to get on with life's next acts.

You came to Trinity two or four or six or more years ago in search of knowledge, wisdom, personal transformation. You have raced across the Marble Corridor chasing the dreams that kept you going through Calculus and Spanish and Organic Chemistry and San Juan's Philosophy and History with Sister Mary Hayes and the wonders of accounting with Mr. Nemani and Communication with Dr. Piland and that special gift of writing well according to Bill Beverly and Wendy Thorbjornsen. You have learned to swing a mean lacrosse stick, tackle the challenges of nursing leadership, parse the different world views of Karl Marx and Karl Rove, shouting out your creative spirit in poetry slams and spending more time on Facebook than you should have --- especially when those papers were due! During your years at Trinity you have celebrated the inauguration of the first African American president in history and shared in the Trinity's pride as the *alma mater* of the first woman ever wielding the gavel as Speaker of the House of the United States of America.

One of the most important purposes of your education here at Trinity is to prepare you to become engaged citizen leaders for our global village. You are taking your degrees into a world beset with immense challenges: terrorism, war, environmental catastrophe, the ongoing abuse of women and children in too many places, our national schizophrenia on immigration and matters of race and social class, the never-ending cycles of poverty and violence for too many of the earth's inhabitants. Your Trinity degree demands that you not shrink from engagement with these complex and intractable problems. How will you choose the cause that will be your life's work?

On that hot August day when I first greeted some of you four years ago, I quoted from some of your admissions essays. One, in particular, stood out as emblematic of the ambition of Trinity Women across the ages:

*"I want to be more than a witness to history, [I want to be] a creator of it."*¹

Like so many Trinity Women before you, you will make history through choosing a life's work that is animated by social justice, a fundamental principle of the Catholic faith that illuminates Trinity's mission through our founders, the remarkable Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Social Justice is a value that we share in common across many religious traditions at Trinity.

¹ Quotation from an admissions application essay of a student who started as a freshman in Fall 2006, with the Class of 2010.

The essential building block of our commitment to social justice is respect for human life and dignity. Threats to human life and dignity abound in contemporary culture, and like many Trinity graduates who came before you, you will embrace the call to raise your voices and devote your intellectual gifts to improving opportunities for peace, for freedom, for equality and liberation for other precious lives that need your strength and passionate advocacy. You will find your inspiration and challenge in the lives and work of other Trinity Women who have made it the cause of their lives to take on the great issues of our times:

- Consider the work of Trinity Alumna Susan Flood Burk, Class of 1976, now serving as President Obama's Ambassador for Nuclear Non-Proliferation. Even with the passing of the Cold War tensions between the old Soviet Union and the United States, nuclear threats persist. Ambassador Burk, whose stellar career started with an internship at the Department of Defense, is now the leader of a team of State Department officials who have worked with President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to shape modern global policy on reducing the nuclear stockpile and enforcing the international nuclear non-proliferation treaty.²
- Consider the work of Dr. Carol Kuhn, Class of 1973, an English major who later embraced medicine for her life's work, taking on challenges in rural communities in Maine, but traveling twice a year to Haiti to work as a physician volunteer with the Konbit-Sante Cap Haitien Health Partnership. When the earthquake devastated Haiti earlier this year, Dr. Kuhn raced back to the island to do what she could to help alleviate the terrible suffering.
- Consider the work of M. Patricia Smith, Trinity Class of 1974, the solicitor of the U.S. Department of Labor, who, in her current work as the top lawyer for the Labor Department ensures that Fair Labor Standards are upheld, that workers receive all protections and just compensation that are their due. Confirmed only in March, she has already had leading roles in the investigation of the coal mine disaster in West Virginia and ensuring protections for workers cleaning up the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.
- Remember Philonda Johnson, Class of 2005, who spoke to you at the Cap and Gown Convocation, the youngest-ever principal of a KIPP Charter School who challenged you with these words in September: *"Class of 2010, your time is now. I charge you to seize every opportunity before you...with audacity. Take your dream and translate it to action. Not ten years from now. Not five years from now. But, today. ...never forget or lose sight of your talents or the LIGHT that is present inside of you that can positively impact our world."*³
- Consider Renee Wolforth, Class of 1998, whose journey from Trinity went through the Peace Corps to Africa in the Republic of Mali, and on to law school following which she pursued her passion for legal advocacy for refugees from sub-Saharan Africa seeking

² See profile of Ambassador Burk in TRINITY Spring 2010 Magazine <http://bit.ly/aVFoUU>

³ Philonda Johnson, Cap & Gown Convocation Address, September 26, 2009, at <http://bit.ly/4zaiD6>

asylum, drawing her back to Africa to work in Tanzania in a refugee camp for the resettlement of those fleeing the terrible crises in Darfur and Congo. She wrote on her blog about this experience:

“I will not be able to understand what has gone on, what is going on, or what may happen in Congo by the time I leave Tanzania - possibly ever. Right now, the majority of refugees we work with here are Congolese, having fled generalized violence in southeastern Congo. Trying to understand the situation seems almost impossible, as the various groups perpetrating the rampant violence change their group names, alliances, tactics, and locations seemingly daily...”

“When I was in Dar es Salaam, a young Tanzanian seminarian told me that if the ruling party has to go into some people's houses at night and kill some people, in order to sustain its grip on power here, that is better than many people being killed in many houses throughout Tanzania.

“At least the country is at peace?”⁴

- Consider Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Class of 1962, and Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius, Class of 1970, and their passionate successful advocacy for legislation that finally ensures decent health care for all Americans. Consider how Speaker Pelosi’s leadership has changed the horizons for women in our nation. Consider her words on the necessity of justice for our brothers and sisters who are immigrants. She also understands clearly the power and importance of a Trinity education. When she spoke at the Mills College commencement last week, Speaker Pelosi said,

“I understand the importance of an all-women’s education; I’m a beneficiary of one myself. I’m a proud graduate of Washington, D.C.’s Trinity College: the oldest women’s Catholic college in America. And it was the confidence and education that I gained at an all-women’s college that helped me go from the kitchen to the Congress.....”⁵

Speaker Pelosi went on to reflect on what it was like to be the first woman in history to be invited to a White House meeting as the leader of a major party. This happened when President Bush was president, and she had just been elected Democratic Leader, the highest position a woman had ever achieved in Congressional Leadership. Leaders of both parties convened with the president at the White House, and as Nancy looked around the room and realized her place in history as the only woman there, she felt the presence of other great women who made that moment possible:

“I started to feel very squeezed in my chair. It was getting more and more crowded. It was as if every woman who had worked to promote women's opportunity was sitting in

⁴ Renee Wolforth Blog at <http://www.dc2tz.blogspot.com/>

⁵ Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, Commencement 2010 Address at Mills College, May 15, 2010, <http://bit.ly/cwE4uP>

*that chair with me — Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Alice Paul, Sojourner Truth, and every other pioneer who fought to gain the right to vote and empowerment for women. I heard them say, ‘At last, we have a seat at the table.’ “My next thought was, ‘We want more.’ We want more women and more people of color to have seats at the table of power.”*⁶

Fast forward a few years to Nancy’s crowning achievement as Speaker of the House in securing the passage of health care reform legislation. She told the Mills audience,

*“This March, I was at the White House again – this time, when historic health care reform was signed into law by President Barack Obama. As the world watched this moment, so did Trinity College. They were very proud to have two alumnae there with the President that day: the first woman Speaker of the House, and the Secretary of Health and Human Services and former Governor of Kansas, Secretary Kathleen Sebelius. We felt the power of all-women’s colleges, of women’s rightful seat at the table, and of our ability to make a difference.”*⁷

Who among you will be next at that table? Who among you will be the new leaders advancing the cause of justice for generations to come?

For 113 years, Trinity’s primary mission commitment has been the education and advancement of women in our society. We are happy and eager to share this mission with all of those good men who work with us, who join Trinity as students in our graduate and professional programs. We believe that they, too, can reap many benefits from an education rooted in the idea of gender justice, which by extension also promotes justice and equality for all people regardless of personal characteristics or life circumstances.

But we remain keenly focused on women’s education and advancement because our legacy as one of the nation’s few remaining historic women’s colleges compels us to be even more forceful stewards of the cause of women’s leadership in our society.

Do not be complacent, my sisters in the Class of 2010. You have had the rare privilege of enjoying your college years in a place run largely by women, governed largely by women, with a faculty composed predominantly of women. We take women’s leadership for granted at Trinity, but the rest of the world --- even in higher education --- is quite different. Nationwide, women are only 23% of college and university presidents, only 46% of faculties with many smaller proportions in math and science, and only 28% of board members. Those proportions for higher education look pretty good compared to the fact that women hold only 18% of top leadership positions in corporate life, only 15% of boards of directors generally, and only 17% of Congress despite the fact that the population is majority female.

In a major study of the condition and status of women worldwide called the Gender Gap Index published by the World Economic Council, the United States ranks only 31st, behind such nations as Cuba, Mongolia, Lesotho and Mozambique on the condition and status of women.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

The authors of the Gender Gap Index write about the urgent need to improve women's opportunities for global leadership:

*“Over the last year, the world has seen the biggest recession in almost a century. It is clear that recovery will require, among other things, the best of talent, ideas and innovation. ... Girls and women make up one half of the world's population—without their engagement, empowerment and contribution, we cannot hope to effectively meet these challenges nor achieve rapid economic recovery.”*⁸

Promoting and sustaining more women in leadership positions is an imperative for the future of our nation and global village as the baby boom population ages and retires, leaving the potential for even larger leadership and labor force gaps than ever before.

You, Trinity's Class of 2010, you must be in the vanguard of the continuing movement to promote women's education and advancement. You have had the incredibly rare privilege of learning in a place that honors and respects what women can do in this world. You now have the obligation to make a return on this investment every day in the lives you improve, encourage and transform thanks to your Trinity education. Trinity is your gift, and now it becomes your legacy.

When you first came to Trinity a member of this class wrote:

*“ I would be the first in my family to set foot on a college campus as a student....If I am successful at college then my younger siblings and cousins will follow and we can all create a new generation of college educated people. I want to be a great influence on changing my family's future legacy.”*⁹

You are creating a legacy for your families and for the families you will influence far and wide with the power of your Trinity degrees.

May your days from this one forward be filled with the joy of achievement, the comfort of your great Trinity friendships, the recognition of the fulfillment of your hard work in your college days in the professional and personal success of your lives. May you go forth with the power, the wisdom and the love of the Trinity as your constant companions, the light for your path, the strength for your work all the days of your lives.

Congratulations, Class of 2010!

⁸ World Economic Forum, 2009 Global Gender Gap Report, <http://bit.ly/p1Fm>

⁹ From an admissions application essay of a student who entered Trinity as a freshman in Fall 2006, part of the Class of 2010.