

Remarks for SEDARMOCS Scholarship Reception  
People's Congregational Church, October 27, 2012

President Patricia McGuire  
Trinity Washington University

Thank you to all of the great women of The Sedarmocs for your kind invitation to share this delightful evening with you. At Trinity, we are so deeply appreciative of the support you extend to our students. I am particularly thrilled to know that Toniqua Adams, Tiffany Hill, LaShawn McConnell and Shanique Washington have received Sedarmocs book scholarships. Books are essential to academic success, but with increasing book prices, many students can't afford to buy books and often have to rely on library copies, which limits their access to study times. The generous support of the Sedarmocs book scholarships helps to ensure that students have the books they need for academic success.

In saluting your work this evening, I want to take this opportunity to focus on the educational needs of our city and the ways in which Trinity tries to respond to those needs.

A note about our history at Trinity provides important context for our work today. 115 years ago, in 1897, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur had a school for girls at the corner of North Capitol and K Streets, known as Notre Dame Academy. The sisters heard that Catholic girls were applying for admission to the then-new Catholic University of America, but the university denied them admission simply because of their gender. The SNDs, a teaching order of nuns founded in France by a visionary woman known as Julie Billiart who is now a saint, believed that women had the same rights as men to obtain the highest level of education possible. So, they founded Trinity to offer a college education to women who were denied access.

Over the years, some of Trinity's famous graduates included the first woman Speaker of the House of the United States Nancy Pelosi, Class of 1962, and the current Secretary of Health and Human Services, former Kansas Governor Kathleen Sebelius, Class of 1970. Maggie Williams was the highest ranking African American in the Clinton White House in the 1990s, and she was Class of 1977. Maisha Leek, Class of 2005, is the youngest chief of staff currently serving on Capitol Hill as the top aide to Philadelphia Congressman Chakka Fattah.

In the 1980's and 1990's, as the former men's universities went coed, Trinity and many other traditional women's colleges declined in enrollment, and we had to make a strategic decision about whether to go coed, refocus our mission, or close entirely. Fortunately, the Sisters of Notre Dame were strong and clear: we founded Trinity to make higher education accessible to women who might not otherwise go to college, they said, and there are still millions of women in this country who face barriers to attending and completing college. As a matter of social justice, they told us, focus Trinity's mission on the women who need this education the most.

With this charge, we refocused Trinity's work on the educational needs of women in the city and nearby suburbs, and we found that by working in partnership with the schools, churches,

community organizations like the Girl Scouts and others, we could develop pipelines for women into our academic programs and later career success.

As Trinity welcomed more students from the Washington region, we evolved our organizational model from a small college to a multi-dimensional university. So, today, we still have our historic women's college as our full-time daytime program with more than 1,000 younger women in the College of Arts and Sciences. And we also now have programs that men as well as women can attend in our School of Professional Studies offering associates, bachelors and master's degrees, as well as our School of Education and School of Nursing and Health Professions.

About half of Trinity's students today come from the District of Columbia, and another 30% from Maryland. Our students today reflect a broad range of races, ethnicities, nationalities and religions --- more than 90% of our students identify as African American or Black, Latina or Hispanic, and many have immediate family roots in Africa, Central America and other global regions.

As Trinity has evolved, we have become even more aware of the acute educational needs and challenges of our city. The District of Columbia has the highest proportion of advanced degrees of any city in the country, but also the highest adult illiteracy rate at nearly 35%. We have the highest per-capita income and one of the highest poverty levels. This severe bifurcation of education and wealth is a scandal for the nation's capital, and evidence of the legacy of racism afflicting our schools and subsequent career pathways. Without academic success, our local residents cannot achieve lifelong professional success and economic security for their families.

What can we do to improve education in D.C.? I'm part of a lot of groups that have this discussion all the time. I have come to a point of view that may be different from others --- I see some missing links in the local discussions of educational improvement that, left unaddressed, are likely to sabotage the best efforts at reform. Some of those missing links include:

- A significantly greater focus on adult education, starting with literacy programs but extended through high school completion and GED, college access and completion of postsecondary credentials. Why is this important? All studies show that the level of a child's education is profoundly affected by the educational level of parents. In particular, the educational level of mothers is crucial to improving the academic success of children. Yet, in all the talk of school reform, we hear almost nothing about improved opportunities for parents to finish their own education so that they can be better teachers for their children.
- Some frank discussion of the condition of families and the behavior of children --- in the great war against teachers that politicians, philanthropists and many school leaders are waging, we hear little discussion of the plain fact that too many children come to school in the morning hungry, or having been up all night because of noise and adult misconduct in the home, or even suffering abuse. The problems of our families have a

direct impact on the ability of children to learn, and teachers should not be blamed because of family dysfunctions.

- Expose the politics of chronic poverty and unequal opportunity in the city. I don't know about you, but I am still puzzled about the fact that this is a city that was able to bring back baseball with a dazzling new stadium and many perks for the wealthy owners but mothers and children still lack decent child care, suffer homelessness, and wonder when their next meal will be. I have students at Trinity who really are not sure where they'll spend the night. Yes, talking about the social safety net is just so unfashionable these days --- have you heard either presidential candidate say the word "poverty" recently? --- and yet, chronic conditions of poverty undermine all efforts at school reform and academic progress for children.

At Trinity, we do what we can to address some of these issues for our students. We provide significant amounts of financial aid --- discounting our own tuition heavily and leveraging other sources of support. We invite benefactors to support our students from the city, and many have responded quite generously.

We know we cannot do this alone --- it really does take a community to educate a child and to produce a very successful adult professional. Organizations like The Sedarmocs are vital partners with institutions like Trinity in responding to the acute needs of our city.

Thank you so much for your great dedication to these important issues, and for your remarkable generosity!