

Remarks for the New Student Convocation

August 26, 2016

President Patricia McGuire

Good morning! I am so pleased to welcome all of our new students to Trinity!

This morning you will receive your Trinity Medal as a sign of your membership in this great community of scholars, and you will recite the Honor Pledge and sign the Honor Agreement.

The Honor Agreement is our way of life at Trinity, and it's been our tradition since the founding. We expect you to live lives of honor and integrity, and to help each other to do so. This sets Trinity apart from many other schools and many places of business today.

The Trinity Medal has, on its front, the image of Our Lady – Notre Dame – the patron of the Sisters of Notre Dame who founded Trinity in 1897. In those days, women did not have the opportunity to go to college in Washington, D.C. The Sisters of Notre Dame saw that was wrong, a grave injustice, so they organized a large effort to raise the money to buy this property and to build the first part of Main Hall. They were very radical women at the end of the 19th Century, doing things that people thought they could not do. They found their own pathways, kept swimming against the tides of opposition to women's education, prejudice against the idea that women were equal to men. When they opened Trinity in November 1900, they did so with the conviction that women could truly change the world through the power of a great education, and in so doing, they believed that women would find the pathway to salvation.

So, your Trinity Medals are symbols --- symbols of the power of women to change the world. Wear them well, wear them with pride, never do anything to disgrace them, show the world why you have the distinction as a woman of power to wear this medal starting today and every day henceforth!

Each year at the new student convocation, I share a little bit of your class profile. I am pleased to tell you that the new Red Class of 2020 and our upperclass transfer students are every bit as diverse, talented and interesting as the many Trinity classes who came before you!

You were born in Nicaragua and New Jersey, Guyana and Georgia, Delaware and California and Pennsylvania, Cameroon and France and Ukraine, Virginia and Ohio and Illinois, Jamaica and Honduras and El Salvador, Maryland and New York and Hawaii, Mexico and Liberia and the Philippines. And yes, the District of Columbia! You are citizens of the U.S. and other nations, truly, citizens of the world. Many of you are part of large immigrant families; some of you are Dreamers, now stepping forward into college often as the first in your families to do so.

You are now residents of DC, Maryland, Virginia and other states. You speak English as well as many languages --- Spanish, Tagalog, French, Amharic, Swahili, Ukrainian, Kirundi, Fanti, Lorma, Oshie,

You profess many religions --- Christian, Catholic, Baptist, Muslim, Hindu and others. You are African American, Latina and many races and ethnicities. You are Girl Scouts and soccer players and talented artists and cheerleaders and volunteers and student leaders. You have danced with the Alvin Ailey Theater. You have felt exotic in China and worried in Liberia and have deep childhood memories of that special tree in the Dominican Republic that was your

creative space. You witnessed violence on the streets of DC and a different kind of violence in the public square in Kiev.

You want to major in Nursing, Biology, Criminal Justice, Psychology, Business, Forensic Science, Communication, Occupational Therapy, Early Childhood Education, Politics, Math, Chemistry, Journalism. Many of you don't know what you want to major in, and that's fine, college is a time for exploration and discovery of ideas and pathways you never even knew existed.

You are Conway Scholars, DC Achievers, Dreamers, Girl Scout Scholars and more.

I want to share a little more about you. I have read your applications to Trinity, including the essays you wrote in those applications. I have taken some anonymous quotes from your essays as evidence of the strength and resilience and power of this class.

You appreciate Trinity's mission in the education and advancement of women because you have known so much of women's struggles. One student writes:

"I appreciate how Trinity has prioritized the education of women within their university. Raised by a single parent mother in small apartment, education and independence has always been important factors in my life. My mother taught me how most women have faced inequality, not only in America but throughout the world. It's our job, as women to change that. In order to change, women have to come together and not only demand but prove equality through success." (Student application essay)

You listed many she-ros in your essays, notably your mothers and grandmothers. This student admires Malala Yousafsa and quoted her:

"As a wise young woman once said, "When the whole world is silent, even one voice becomes powerful." Standing up and getting your voice heard may seem like an overwhelming thing, but we have to thank Malala Yousafzai for teaching us otherwise with her courage and dedication. ...When the lives of many people, especially girls, became foggy with the unfairness of a leader that took away their education, Malala became the light that gave hope to many. ...she has influenced my life by teaching me that we should never be afraid to stand up for what we believe in and that we should never back down in fear of getting our voices heard. ... No matter how insignificant we may feel in a world full of billions of people, one voice- it only takes one voice to start a movement. It takes one voice to move messages across oceans and transform the lives of others. And one voice, Malala's voice, to teach us all that we are meant to go beyond our comfort zone and that changes, dreams and education can be achievable." (Student application essay)

You have known the struggles and challenges of immigrant children. This student writes:

"My parents explained that coming to the United States was a big opportunity for us. I understood this, but with this opportunity I faced many difficulties and I am thankful to my mentors that motivated me to strive and see education as a key." (Student application essay)

Another writes:

“My parents came to America to give me a better future...I want to make sure I become a promising leader to my family so I can say, “I graduated from college and the first one in my family to graduate!” I want to say those words to my mom so when I see her face light up, turning red, crying in tears. I will now that I have become worthy. Worthy of being an adult stepping out into the real world...” (Student application essay)

This student grew up in Senegal:

“I never give up because I have always believed that I have to make mistakes so that I can learn from them and then improve. I find this works. Never giving up. There is a wonderful word in English that I love that describes this process: persistence. I want to improve my English language. My goal is to finish college. I want to study nursing and I want, when I grow up, to run a business, school and a hospital in Senegal because in Senegal there are a lot of students who do not graduate from high school because there is no high school for them. In Senegal there are many women who die in childbirth because they have complications and the hospital is too far away for them to get emergency treatment. I want everyone in Senegal, the United States, and in the rest of the world, to have the education and health care they deserve. Access to education and health care is a human right everyone should have.” (Student application essay)

You have known the joys and struggles and disappointments of Dreamers, young women who came to this country as children never realizing until your high school years that some dreams are denied you because of papers, but you persist anyway. This is a longer essay excerpt because it aptly captures the experiences and sentiments of many Trinity Dreamers:

“A three-year-old-girl with puffy hair and a devious smile sees the American flag waving proudly, and races down a terminal of Dulles International Airport. She is arriving from Morocco with hopes and dreams of living in the U.S.A., the land of opportunities. Fast forward four years. She has now developed an unprecedented love for politics at just seven years old. “I want to be a president,” she would chant as she marched around the room. Little does she know the beloved country she now calls home does not offer the same opportunities for everyone. Growing up with the weight of the immigrant experience – which often consists of thankless work, fear and living a life without access --- I slowly realized being an immigrant is like being a blade of grass in a sea of flourishing flowers.

“Grass pledges allegiance to the same sun as flowers, and some know more about photosynthesis than the average rose. Yet grass gets stepped on and ignored. We are all products of the same soil, but flowers are more accepted as the only standard of beauty and acknowledged as a status symbol of success. So now imagine me, now a 10-year-old girl full of anxiety from watching family members go through this same plight and wondering what their future holds. Imagine the 16-year-old girl who couldn’t go for her driver’s license like all of her friends. Imagine now being [old enough] to vote in this year’s primaries but not being able to

do so, or as a hardworking college applicant limited with scholarships, FAFSA and in-state tuition. There a millions of blades of grass who turn on the news and have to hear a front runner in the presidential election call us rapists, criminals and drug dealers. But if one thing this country has taught me it's that you should always speak up and not be silenced by bad circumstances or inequity.

“My family has taught me that you should always be proud of where you came from and embrace all aspects of your identity. Being a Dreamer has taught me that life isn't fair. You can get put in situations beyond your control and have to learn how to fight for what you want. I will not allow my status to be a ceiling. Black and brown bodies already face so much prejudice and discrimination. As one who lives in the intersection of womanhood, blackness and a Cameroonian/Moroccan identity, I am pushed to a very marginalized space. However, my situation helped me develop a deeply rooted intrinsic motivation to succeed. I will keep on dreaming, and when I wake up, I may not be a flower, but I will still hold my own space of joy rooted in success, accomplishments and the ability to choose my own path.” (Student application essay)

You have known many hardships, including the deaths of loved ones, homelessness, violence and poverty. Yet you have learned to triumph over circumstances. This student writes:

“A personal experience that has dramatically transformed my life is when my mother was incarcerated. It made me mature because I had to take on a motherly role for younger brother. ...I contemplated on how I can take the responsibility of taking care of my younger brother when I am still a child myself. I had to prepare him for school, feed him basically, and behave as a mother to him.” (Student application essay)

You fight to overcome stereotypes:

“People assume that if you are living in southeast D.C you are not smart or successful. You are being stereotyped as a negative person which is not true. ... I want to prove to people that I can be successful and not be the stereotype. ...I do not want to be that statistic. I am the first person to go to college out of my family, ...Getting an undergraduate degree will help alleviate the financial struggles my mother has. Leaving for college will give my younger siblings the idea that they do not have to live the lifestyle that they are growing up in. My siblings need to know that they can get out and go to college.” (Student application essay)

This student from Guyana wrote about her struggle to overcome the internalized racism that led to contempt for Afrocentric features even in her own family, and a debilitating lack of self-worth as a result of what we might call “body-shaming” today:

“I know my story isn't unique. Across cultures people of colour deal with internalized racism. This is the legacy of colonization. It only takes one person to end the cycle and I'm happy to be that person for my family.” (Student application essay)

You admire your mothers very much:

“My mother is my role model. She is my backbone, as well as my partner in crime. Whenever I was in trouble, sad, happy, or mad, my mother was always there. She taught me how to behave, read and write. My mother has taught me how to be the young women that I am today, as well as how to set my priorities straight. ... My mother has always taught me how to be comfortable in my own skin. I have a high self-esteem and all confidence in myself, and I believe that I can get through any challenge. I have my mother to thank for all of the good and bad moments in life, as well as the lessons well learned.” (Student application essay)

Another writes:

“Many people have role models or people they look up to in their life. My mother is my role model and someone I look up to. The things that I admire the most and have tried to apply to my own life is being independent, always look forward and not backwards and always being there for my family. Although my mother and I would argue a lot, she's always been there for me as long I can remember; always supporting me through every decision I made. When I had trouble in school or with friends she would always tell me how everything was going to be okay, and give me advice trying to calm me down. By going to college, I would be the first in the family to be able to and I intend to work hard so that in the future I can help my mom even more...” (Student application essay)

Another writes:

“My mother is one of the strongest, most independent, influential women I know. My mother has always put me and my sister's needs before her own, even if that meant not eating. I can remember a time when I was a little girl eating dinner and I asked my mom, “are you going to eat too?” She said to me, “I'm fine, you go ahead and eat”. I knew there was nothing left, but she didn't make it a big issue. She just wants to make sure her children were fed. That time in our lives always stuck with me, and reminds me of the sacrifices she has made for us.” (Student application essay)

You have your own children to care for, and you want to be role models for them:

“Being a mother of a four-year-old has given me the ambition to set new goals for myself, to be successful and leave a blue print for my daughter to follow. At this point in my life, I plan to take full advantage of all opportunities that I am offered.” (Student application essay)

Several of you wrote about your love for animals and desire to pursue careers either in veterinary medicine or other animal-related work. This student writes,

“I... seek to understand animal behavior, biology, and environmental impacts to encourage others to love and respect animals as I have. In my lifetime, I hope to encourage animal institutions such as local zoos and aquariums to provide rehabilitation for animals that are unable to heal themselves and become beacons of research and innovative conservation efforts to help dwindling animal populations. ... Attending college is the only way I would be able to achieve this goal. ... Studying zoology would provide me with the discipline and knowledge necessary to achieve my goals of rehabilitation of animals and conservation efforts for animal populations.” (Student application essay)

This student struggled for acceptance after she came out to her mother who then rejected her:

“Tribalism is division by sexuality, race, religion, personal figures, and over all life choices. But why be discriminated for your own belief and why be categorized into a group in order to feel approved by other humans? In the end it's your life and you only live once, right? Why not make it how you want it?” (Student application essay)

You have been not only a witness but a protagonist in a great revolution for the rights of your people; this student was in the central square of the city of Kiev during the political struggle for independence there:

[In November 2013 in Ukraine there were protests on the central square of Kiev, known as Maidan, over the attempt by Russia to take over Ukraine. This student was there, and she writes....] “... being on Maidan with my father and his friends, who actively participated in the movement, I had a chance to have one of the most powerful experiences of my life. I stood on the central stage of Maidan next to my father in front of hundreds of thousands of people seeing their eyes, which had no fear, but were full of compassion and courage. I had shivers down my spine and not because of the severe frost but being impressed by this unity in desire for freedom.

“Maidan, also known as the Revolution of Dignity, was gaining momentum and more people with more efforts were involved. My friends and I organized a point in our school for collecting warm clothes, medicines, snacks and other things that were most needed to support people coming from all parts of Ukraine. We then brought these collections to Maidan just like many other residents of Kyiv to stand together for our belief. I then learned that people-to-people support was key for the Revolution in Maidan. It was a great positive feeling.

“The Revolution of Dignity and the Heavenly Hundred marked my maturing, showing what it means to fight for your beliefs, fear for your loved ones, sacrifice, mourn for some of the greatest people of your nation and yet, to be proud of your country and believe in humanity.” (Student application essay)

That student’s experience is unique, and yet it also resonates in its most fundamental principles with the experiences of every student here today. Each of you has been part of the human struggle for freedom, for dignity and equality. In this country, we are beset by forces that also cry out for revolution and peaceful resolution. Whether you proclaim Black Lives Matter or march for the rights of undocumented immigrants, whether you advocate for dignity for LGBTQ

persons or volunteer your time in schools and communities seeking to relieve poverty and homelessness and illiteracy and despair --- in all of the ways that you have brought the power of your brains and sheer force of your compassionate souls to the needs of this age, you have been part of the ongoing American revolution that is a quest for freedom and equality that is never quite over.

You have so many ideas and opinions and needs and hopes for improvement in this society. Here are some of the issues you have put forward as the most important things to be on the agenda of the new president (quotes from comment cards students submitted during the ceremony; they were asked to advise the new president of the United States on issues of greatest importance to their families and communities):

“Your duty is to the people. Remember that!”

“More legal protections for women in the workplace, victims of hate crimes, sexual assault and domestic violence, ensure social security benefits for seniors and Americans with disabilities.”

“Lower taxes for middle & low class families, make college more affordable and do something about the injustice that’s only dividing this country.”

“Education should be affordable so people will have the opportunity to grow out of poverty.”

“The message I would give the new President is that he/she must make affordable education because I know many friends who could not afford college. I think if more youth could go to college this country could be great again.”

“I would hope you will bring peace to our country and make sure you can bring more help to people who need it.”

“I want the future president to make America great again. Fight for rights of all people regardless of who they are. Tackle the issues in ours and other countries. Make peace with other countries. For the next generation to never suffer as we did.”

“Black Lives Matter.”

“The most important thing to help my family and community is to have gun control, to decrease police brutality, and to keep everyone safe.”

“I want the next president to make equal pay [a priority], affordable education and gun control not just for myself but for others so that as a community we feel safe.”

“If I had the opportunity to meet up with the President on Inauguration Day, I would tell him/her that the most important message is Immigration Reform. I would like to see a president who uses the power of the voice of all 11 million immigrants who live in this country — let their voice actually be heard.”

“President, I will impress upon you the task of expanding the affordability of postsecondary education. College education has always been regarded as significant. I desire our government to match this significance with funding.”

“All Americans should, without question, have access to basic human rights such as education, food, healthcare and the freedom to express themselves in an environment that is safe from police brutality or hate.”

We took a straw poll this morning for the 2016 presidential election. Here are the results: the new students of Trinity voted as follows:

- Hillary Clinton – 122 votes
- Other Candidates – 52 votes
- Donald Trump – 1 vote

This year we have such an important choice to make for the future of our nation, and frankly, for the world. You must pay attention. You must be politically engaged. Whatever candidate you like, whatever sides of the issues you care about, you must do one thing above all else: if you are eligible you must VOTE. Even if you are not old enough to vote or not a citizen, you can be engaged with the issues and work for the candidates of your choice.

Trinity has a long and proud track record for political engagement of our graduates. You have heard of our famous alumna Nancy Pelosi, Class of 1962, the first and only woman to be Speaker of the House and still the Democratic Leader. You will meet the very first Trinity Woman in Congress the Honorable Barbara Kennelly, Class of 1958, now on our faculty. You will meet advisor to President Clinton and First Lady Clinton Peggy Lewis, class of 1977 now dean of our School of Business and Graduate Studies. Her classmate Maggie Williams was chief of staff to First Lady Hillary Clinton in the 1990’s. You probably do not know this, but a Trinity Alumna Kellyanne Conway, Class of 1989, just became the campaign manager for Donald Trump --- you see her on the news quite a lot these days. Yes, we have all sides of the aisle, and that’s ok with Trinity. We stand for women’s leadership and political engagement --- whatever flavor you choose, you must choose engagement.

You are women of power and people of hope for your families and communities. You bring life and excitement and challenge to Trinity. We are so blessed to have this chance to get to know you, to learn with you, to be part of your journey toward intellectual fulfillment and personal growth. Know that we are always here for you.

As you put on your Trinity medals and leave this convocation today, know that you go with the blessings of our great founders, the Sisters of Notre Dame who may never have met you, but who made this great university for you. You are the latest in a long line of Trinity women stretching across more than a century; you join this great movement in women’s education and advancement, the most powerful force we have to change the world.

May the strength, wisdom and love of the Trinity be with you as you begin your Trinity days!