

Tuajuanda C. Jordan
President, St. Mary's College of Maryland
February 29, 2016
Black History Month keynote address given at the St. Mary's County Black History Coalition Celebration
Mechanicsville, Maryland

The Road to Freedom

“Education is the key to unlock the golden door to freedom.” This is a quote from George Washington Carver. What do these words make you think of? My initial thoughts are of darkness and enslavement. Having someone else in control of my life and my destiny. Education provides a level of control. Education can put you on the road to freedom - freedom to choose, freedom to be.

My maternal grandmother, my greatest role model who had only a third grade education, was my inspiration and motivation. She worked as a live-in maid to take care of her family and she would always tell me, “You need to be able to take care of yourself and your responsibilities.” Being able to take care of oneself and one’s responsibilities. That is liberating. To my grandmother, the woman with the third grade education, freedom for her children was to get them to go to high school. For my parents, it meant that I had to go to college.

Being that my parents had not attended college, I had no idea what to expect if I got there. I didn’t know the process for applying. I had no idea that there were so many different types of colleges let alone how to choose one. All I knew was that I had to go. So, I worked hard in school and, even when I wanted to go hang out with my friends, I always did my schoolwork first. It was about setting priorities. And my priority was to attain freedom.

If I were today preparing to apply to college, I would be labeled as “at-risk.” “At risk” for what? “At risk” of not succeeding in college because I had several risk factors: 1) first in my family to attend college, 2) from a lower socio-economic status, and 3) an underrepresented minority. With these three “strikes” against me, would I really strike out?

As I stand before you today as a college president, you already know the answer to that question. The upshot? I have achieved the level of success that I have because of people who have appeared at just the right moment to shine the light on the path I was to take on the road to freedom.

- Applied to schools with major football teams

- Went to Fisk, an HBCU with a terrible football team. Changed my life.
 - Environment – filled with others who looked like me. Professors who were committed to my success
 - Dr. Ford and the MARC program
- Purdue – Felt ill-prepared
 - Grandmother. Victor Rodwell.
 - First African American woman to get a PhD in Biochemistry
- Xavier University of Louisiana (XULA)
 - Faculty member with a research grant. Mentored lots of students. Loved teaching.
 - Norman Francis, Deidre Labat, Ann Barron
- The Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI)
 - Major philanthropy funding biomedical research and science education excellent. Peter Bruns.
 - First African American woman to be named a director of science education
- Lewis and Clark - First African American dean of the college. Bob Klonoff

And here, I find myself today at St. Mary's College of Maryland in a place that some might consider hallowed ground, a place where the concept of religious toleration, the separation of religion from government, was born – here in St. Mary's County, Maryland.

St. Mary's County is a place with a checkered past, especially as it relates to underrepresented minorities. It is here in which we have Sotterley Plantation – a site where slaves who had survived the Middle Passage were taken to be sorted and then shipped to slave states. However, it is also here that Mathias DeSousa became the first legislator of African descent in North America in 1642. On the flip side, Margaret Brent, a woman of power, respect, and stature within the colony, was the first woman to petition to vote in North America; a petition that was denied.. I highlight Mathias DeSousa and Margaret Brent because they are the namesakes of the DeSousa-Brent Scholars program on my campus, a program for underserved students with excellent potential for success.

It is here in St. Mary's County that a public institution was founded as a place where girls could go to learn to think and become productive citizens of the state beyond the confines of their individual homes. That institution that was created in 1840 was St. Mary's Female Seminary, the institution that we now call St. Mary's College of Maryland. The Seminary was the brainchild of three men, one of whom was a descendant of the owners of the Sotterley plantation.

In the beginning, St. Mary's Female Seminary was led by a male principal and it enrolled 10 white females from Southern Maryland who could pursue two courses of study. Today, we have more than 1,700 students from across the country and around the world, a diverse student population who have the opportunity to pursue degrees in 25 different areas – areas as diverse as physics, theater, and, economics – and graduate having an educational experience grounded in the tradition of the liberal arts that prepares them for a lifetime of success in an ever-changing and inter-connected global society. *That* is freedom.

The education one receives from St. Mary's College of Maryland is one of the best in the country and I am not just saying that because I am the president. The data support this assertion and we have national accolades that demonstrate that others, external to the College, recognize our successes. St. Mary's College is one of only two public honors colleges in the country and we were the first. We are one of only two public institutions in the state that are not part of the USM. Our student to faculty ratio is extremely small (10:1) and **all** of our courses are taught by professors – an example of the close, personal attention our students receive that helps foster their success. We have the highest 4-year graduation rate in the state among public institutions, and the seventh highest of all public institutions in the country. Our 6-year graduation rate of underrepresented minorities is the same as that of the majority students – 83%. Thus, there is no achievement gap among the students who graduate from the College. We are ranked in the top 100 of *all national* liberal arts colleges in the country and in the top 6 of all public liberal arts colleges in the nation.

This small, nationally ranked college located on a peninsula in Southern Maryland is led for the first time in its 176-year history by a person of color - a person who is a descendant of slaves. Is that not ironic that an institution that has at its inception ties to Sotterley plantation is now led by a woman whose ancestors most likely spent time at Sotterley as slaves? Indeed it is. Nationally, approximately 30% of all college presidents are female, 13% of whom are underrepresented minorities. And of that small number only 9% lead majority institutions, i.e. schools that are neither MSIs nor community colleges.¹ This is a milestone of note on this special day in 2016 – the final day in the month the country celebrates Black History as we transition to Women's History tomorrow.

What are lessons I have learned along the way? First, listen to your grandmother or whoever that older person is who cares about your well-being, your welfare and who you trust! Second, always, always do your best because there is no telling who is looking and who, among them, will provide you with an opportunity/a path that you never knew

¹ <http://wihe.com/women-presidents-now-26-4-but-still-underrepresented/>

existed or you never knew you could attain. And finally, you must have patience. The road to freedom is long and there are no shortcuts. Prepare yourself for the arduous journey. As Mario Andretti is credited with saying, “Desire is the key to motivation, but it’s *determination and commitment* to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal – a commitment to excellence – that will enable you to attain the success you seek.”

Everyone is put here on this Earth for a purpose. Today, the number of opportunities available to you appears to be endless and at times it can be overwhelming. Instead of frantically running around trying this, that, and the other, I encourage you to stop and listen. Your path will be revealed to you, as my grandmother used to say, in the by and by.

Thank you.