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State Senate 25th District Rising Stars Celebration
February 29, 2016
Annapolis, Maryland

Rising Stars: Believing, Shining, Humble

“In order to succeed, we must first believe we can.” How simplistically profound! This quote is credited to Nikos Kazantzakis¹. At the end of the day, isn't “believing” the most significant part of the challenge? You must believe that you can get it done.

I am one who believes that for every problem, there is a solution. The solution may not be readily apparent, but that doesn't matter. Those who are successful have the ability to figure out what they need to do to get it done. I am going to go out on a limb and say that, because you are being recognized as a rising star, you have figured out a way to get it done. You don't accept any excuses. You don't pass the challenge on to others. You don't blame others for the challenge. You roll up your sleeves and get it done.

Where does that kind of fortitude, focus, and determination come from? Scientists who study humanity often ask whether something comes from nature or the environment in which one is raised. I believe that when it comes to fortitude, focus, and determination, nature plays the bigger part – i.e., it's in your DNA.

I have a PhD in biochemistry. Are my parents scientists? No. Do my parents have advanced degrees? No. In fact neither of them went to college. What they do have is fortitude, drive, determination, and integrity. I can trace these traits and characteristics through the generations back to 1842 – as far back as I've been able to trace my family history.

My story

- Born in Charlottesville, VA
- Family moved to Prince George's County, MD, the summer between the fifth and sixth grades.
- I attended Doswell E. Brooks Elementary, Francis Scott Key Junior High, and Suitland High School. I spent my weekends reading books – especially biographies for some reason – making word searches or math puzzles, playing sports, and working on/talking about cars with my Dad.

¹ Wrote books e.g., *Zorba The Greek* and *the Last Temptation of Christ*

- Discovered chemistry in the eleventh grade and found a passion for science (late bloomer). In the twelfth grade I took pre-calculus, physics, and advanced biology because I had to make up for lost time.
- Suitland had academic tracks. I remember sitting in the multi-purpose room and listening to them call out our names and then a group letter... A, B, C, D. I didn't know what that was about, but I noticed that most of my friends were in either Group B or C. I was placed in Group D. What was that about? I looked around and discovered that only two of the kids who lived in my segregated neighborhood were in Group D. There were only five of us out of a group of 40 or so students. Pressure. This was the “smart group” and I had to perform!
- Upon reflection, I realize that I’ve always had a sense of obligation to succeed.
 - Maternal grandmother: a live-in maid; third grade; worked hard; “Take care of yourself and your responsibilities”
 - Parents worked hard
- College choice and Dr. Ford
- First African American woman to earn a PhD in biochemistry from Purdue University
- First African American director of science education at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute
- First African American dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Lewis & Clark in Portland, Oregon
- First African American president of St. Mary’s College of Maryland, an institution that is 176 years old, one of only two honors colleges in the country, and one of the best liberal arts colleges – private or public – in the nation

What has motivated and inspired me over the years? I have a strong sense of my responsibility to my family and a deep desire to make a difference. I very much believe that education is the key to curing many of our societal ills. Herbert Spencer wrote, “The great aim of education is not knowledge but action.”² I take that to heart. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of man’s inhumanity to man³ and I often incorporate that phrase in my writings and speeches. I am perplexed by the inhumanity and incivility that appears to prevail in today’s society. Thus, I try to lead by example. I make conscious decisions to speak up when I see something that I know in my spirit is wrong.

I am not a college president by choice. I am a college president because I was led to be here at this time. I believe I am in a position where I can make a difference that can be of

² Herbert Spencer was an English philosopher, 1820 - 1903

³ MLK, Jr. Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963

long-term benefit to society. Throughout my life, individuals have appeared at critical junctures to provide advice and guidance. As we travel life's road, we have a tendency to think that we are in control of our destiny. Many believe that they alone are responsible for their successes. I don't believe any of that. Thus, as your star continues to rise and begins to shine brighter with each passing moment, it is essential and necessary for you to remember that that which you have achieved and will continue to accomplish is the result of years of effort and countless numbers of individuals supporting you – many in ways that you may never know. As John Wooden is credited with saying, "Talent is God-given. Be humble. Fame is man-given. Be grateful. Conceit is self-given. Be careful."⁴

*You are a shining star. No matter who you are. Shining bright to be. What you can truly be.*⁵

*Just like moons and like suns
With the certainty of tides
Just like hopes springing high
Still (you'll) rise...*

*(You'll) rise.
(You'll) rise.
(You'll) rise!*⁶

⁴ John Wooden, UCLA basketball coach

⁵ Lyrical refrain from "Shining Star" by Earth, Wind, and Fire

⁶ Modified excerpt from Maya Angelou's poem "And Still I Rise"