

**Tuajuanda C. Jordan, President, St. Mary's College of Maryland**  
**Keynote Address: Coming Together to Work Together**  
**St. Mary's County Human Relations Commission breakfast**  
**Saturday, November 1, 2014**

## **Introduction**

Good morning everyone!

I am honored to be your keynote speaker for the annual Human Relations Commission's volunteer awards breakfast. Thank you, Joshua Brewster, for your kind introduction.

## **President and Scientist: The Community as an Organism**

I am here today not only as a college president, but as a scientist. As a biochemist, making connections is the basis of my academic research. How do atoms come together in different combinations to create molecules? How do different molecules come together to form everything in this world from the macromolecules proteins, DNA & RNA, lipids (fats), and complex carbohydrates (sugars) to that most complicated and elegant organism--our human bodies?

In many ways, a community is like an organism. It is full of individual people who each have their own unique characteristics and who combine in an endless variety of ways. An individual person can be a family member, a coworker, a teammate, a member of the congregation... What does it mean to be a member of the community? What does it matter the role played by any one single individual? What difference does one person make?

A community is made strong, is made healthy, by the active commitment of its members. As with our own bodies, it is the active participation of all of our systems that maintains our good health. When one or more of our internal systems fails to function properly, we describe ourselves as ill. Likewise, a healthy community depends on the engagement of all of its members or it can suffer both physical ills such as neglect and social ills such as crime, isolation, and apathy.

### **Community Impact of Volunteerism**

Volunteering is an investment in our community and the people who live in it.

Volunteers have a tremendous impact on the health and well-being of a community.

Think of all the ways that volunteers make a difference in everyday life in St. Mary's County:

- We rely on volunteers to provide critical services such as our firefighters and rescue squads.
- We rely on volunteers to keep our roads, our parks, and our waterways clean and safe.
- We rely on volunteers to tutor, to coach, to mentor our children and teenagers.
- We rely on volunteers to repair and build houses, and provide a wide range of services to those in need.

What if one day all the volunteers in St. Mary's County simply did not show up? How many of our elderly, how many of our needy, how many of our children would suffer

on that day? It is the large and small acts of volunteerism that bind the community together.

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service, 61.8 million individuals in the United States contributed 8 billion hours of volunteerism in a single year. That represents about 125 h or 3 1/8 work weeks per volunteer! The economic value of that tremendous, selfless act was estimated at \$162 billion.

### **Individual Impact of Volunteerism**

The benefits of volunteering impact the individual as well as the community. A study released by United Health Group and the Optum Institute in June 2013 found that volunteering is linked to better physical, mental and emotional health.

“Findings show that the benefits of volunteering help strengthen communities and have real, measurable health benefits for the people who volunteer”. *Doing Good is Good for You: 2013 Health and Volunteering Study* reported that 76% of US adults who volunteer report that volunteering has made them feel physically healthier, and 78% report that volunteering lowers their levels of stress, leading to feeling better than adults who do not volunteer.

The study also found that employers benefit from employees who volunteer in terms of better employee health and in professional skills development that employees use in the workplace. The study reveals four key benefits of volunteering that make a positive impact on people’s well-being: health, stress, purpose, and engagement.

In the words of Booker T. Washington: “If you want to lift yourself up, lift up someone else.”

### **St. Mary’s College Gives Back**

Being an active member of the community requires us to look beyond ourselves and give something back. A community can be as small as the street on which we live or as large as the planet we inhabit. Since 1963, the St. Mary’s County Human Relations Commission has worked to promote understanding and harmony among the people of St. Mary’s County, supporting another characteristic of a healthy system: diversity. Whether we are talking about a forest with only one type of tree, a farm field with only one type of crop, or a community made up of only one type of person, a single system is a vulnerable system. Scientists have long known that the healthiest ecosystem is one that is diverse. The same is true for communities.

Like the Human Relations Commission, St. Mary’s College of Maryland works to create a sense of belonging among our students as well as contributing to the well-being of our St. Mary’s County community. We have been proud to work with you on past efforts such as the annual Martin Luther King, Jr. prayer breakfast and Study Circles. I look forward to expanding on our work together in the coming months.

Each year, our students are asked to accept the “St. Mary’s Way” as an underpinning for the way in which each of us functions as a member of the college community.

The St. Mary’s Way includes:

- support for the tradition of tolerance which is the heritage of St. Mary's founding,
- respect for the natural environment,
- individual responsibility for work and actions,
- building relationships based upon mutual respect, honesty, integrity and trust,
- engaging an ongoing dialogue that values differences and the unique contribution of each other's talents, backgrounds, customs, and worldviews,
- a commitment to examining and shaping the functional, ethical values of our changing world,
- contributing to a spirit of caring and an ethic of service.

Volunteerism is an important element of the St. Mary's College community. There are a total of 26 clubs and organizations on campus that take part in Service and Social Change. The clubs' activities range from promotion of ethnic diversity to leadership to sustainability to education. During the last school year, the clubs and organizations of St. Mary's College completed approximately 7300 hours of service around the county. Volunteer hours were carried out in a variety of places including local soup kitchens and shelters, a Habitat for Humanity project, Greenwell State Park cleanups, work at Historic St. Mary's City, teaching at local elementary schools, and Chesapeake Bay cleanup. In the first two months of this academic year, we have already recorded around 2500 hours of service.

Our students understand the importance of giving back, not only while they are on campus but beyond. St. Mary's College is proud to be among the top schools in the

country sending our alumni/ae to be Peace Corps volunteers for service around the world. We are also regularly named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll. This designation is the highest honor a college or university can receive for its commitment to volunteerism, service learning, and civic engagement.

As the new president of St. Mary's College of Maryland, I am deeply committed to the mission of the college and to its future. While some of that work is internal, much of it involves relationships that are external to the college as well. I am committed to making St. Mary's College of Maryland a strong partner for the local community and a resource for education and culture. I am committed to providing opportunities for our students to interact as volunteers throughout the local community in ways that will support both their academic and personal development.

As I noted in my inaugural address, we at St. Mary's stand upon the shoulders of those who were sensitive to issues of inclusivity and acceptance 400 years ago. We will not forget our history. We will embrace diversity in all its forms. It is time, at this place that has a conflicted history of toleration and enslavement, for us to be the model of what 21<sup>st</sup>-century higher education must embrace: inclusivity, diversity, affordability, relevancy, and entrepreneurialism. We can carry this message not only to our students, but to our partners in the community. The benefit will not only touch the College, but the local community as well.

## **Closing**

I've heard the following story from many sources and share it with you today as one of my favorites:

This is a story about a man who died and went to heaven. "Before I enter," he said to the gatekeeper, "I would like you to take me on a tour of hell." The gatekeeper found a guide to take the man to hell. When they got there, the man was astonished to see a great table piled high with every tasty food he could imagine - anything one could possibly want to eat or drink. The man then looked at the people. They were all starving. "How could this be?" he asked the guide. "Are they not allowed to eat?" "Oh yes, they can eat," said the guide "but they must use the forks they are given. They are five feet long and they must hold them at the end. Just look at them. They miss their mouths every time!" "Enough," said the man, "This is hell, indeed! Please take me back to heaven."

In heaven, to his surprise, he saw a similar room, with a similar table loaded with all the same food. But, the people were in radiant health, happy and well-nourished. The man turned to the guide and said, "I see - no forks here." The guide replied that yes, the people were still issued forks and yes, they were still five feet long and that they still must be held at the end - but, the difference was that in heaven the people learned to feed each other.

I have ranged far and wide this morning, from the atoms that are the building blocks of our physical world to a feast in heaven. What a colorful tapestry of images! The common thread that binds them all together is that of connection, of reliance upon each other in order to enrich the lives of all.

I am also struck by the juxtaposition of my schedule this morning—from here I travel to Sotterley to speak at the Middle Passage Commemoration. In the space of an hour, I am transported between our present day discussion of respect for all and service to each other to a former plantation where we will mark a piece of our history that includes slavery and a lack of fundamental human rights. How far we have come! And still, the work continues and we have yet more rivers to cross.

In the words of Dr. King: *“Everyone can be great because anyone can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t even have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve... You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”* --Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I look forward to continuing to build and strengthen the connections between St. Mary’s College and our local friends and neighbors. I thank the Human Relations Commission for your important work in our community. Thank you once again for the privilege of speaking this morning. Congratulations to the volunteers who are being honored this morning. Thank you for your service.