

The Power of X

“Weaving the Story of Women’s Lives”... What a wonderful theme! The vision it evokes is one of complexity, strength, and beauty. Is that not what womanhood is about? I believe complexity, strength, and beauty are attributes of womanhood. From the beginning of time, we have been mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters, and lovers. The very backbone of society is borne out of our innate ability to “quietly” nurture, support, and guide. Examples of these “Quiet Storms” are Eleanor Roosevelt, Rosalynn Carter, and Michelle Obama. In my view, these are women whose highly successful and visible husbands very much leaned on them for support and guidance – especially during challenging times. At the same time, these women raised the children and managed the household while exerting quiet influence on societal mores.

Washington Irving wrote in *The Sketch Book* “There is in every true woman’s heart a spark of heavenly fire which lies dormant in the broad daylight of prosperity, but which kindles up and beams and blazes in the dark hour of adversity”. Do you know women like this? I believe many of us do. I think of Christine Wrayⁱ who was called in to raise the standard of care at a local hospital. Because of her success there, she has been asked now to do the same at a struggling Southern Maryland regional hospital. I also think of Sybol Anderson, a professor at the College. Sybol noticed that traditionally underserved students struggled at the College.

She developed a program that is being heralded as a state model, one that provides support and leadership development for these students. These students are now retained and graduating at the same rate as the other students. And, here tonight, one of our honorees is a woman who "saw a need to provide resources and legal assistance to persons experiencing domestic violence. Armed with pure determination, she wrote grants, hired staff and negotiated *pro bono* services while [tending to the unmet needs of the community]. She has been on the forefront of important legislation for women and continues to educate, advocate, and strengthen our community through unselfish giving of her time and talent." I am speaking of Lynn Fitrell, this year's Lifetime Achievement Award recipient.

When I examine the history of St. Mary's College of Maryland, that little school near the end of this peninsula, time and time again it is a woman who has emerged at a critical point in the College's history to navigate it through a tumultuous storm and to lead it to a better place. As you know, St. Mary's College started as a female seminary in 1840. Female seminaries were borne out of this country's need to break away from the traditions of Europe and to establish a new standard of "excellence", one that required the education of women.ⁱⁱ

The history of the College began when a doctor, a lawyer, and a planter got together and decided that girls in Southern Maryland must be educated.

They chose a male as the principal when the school opened its doors in 1846. From the very beginning, the school struggled to keep its doors open. There was a new male principal at the helm every few years but none of them was able to stabilize and grow the tiny school. Finally, in 1923, one of the teachers, M. Adele France, was asked to take over. Within a short period of time, Ms. France shored up the curriculum to ensure that the young women attending the school had the skills necessary to be successful beyond that place. Under her leadership, a sustainable boarding school model was created that eventually transformed the school into a four-year junior college that prepared students, both female *and* male, for their place in the *world*. Adele France put the institution on firm footing for the 20th century. She became the first president of the College.

Here we are today in the early years of the 21st century and I, an African American woman, stand before you as the seventh president of the College. Today, St. Mary's College is a nationally ranked, 4-year co-educational public institution deeply rooted in the traditions of liberal education. A *public honors college* is rare, so rare that there are only two in the country and we are one of them. What makes St. Mary's College so wonderfully unique is the mission that requires us to provide an excellent educational experience comparable to private, elite liberal arts institutions while maintaining access and affordability – a tall order indeed and one not to be attempted by the faint of heart!

Are we at a critical point in St. Mary's College's history? Yes, we are. However, we are at a critical point not because I am the first African American president. I was born during a period in US history that necessitated my being the first in at least *one* place if I were to live a life of significance. But, alas, I am the first of several things and I hope we are getting to a point as a nation where these types of firsts are no longer prevalent. A positive aspect of being the first in several places is that you feel you are prepared for virtually any challenge that confronts you! I am a first-generation college student who became the first African American female to graduate with a PhD in Biochemistry from Purdue University; the first African American to become a director of science education at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, the largest biomedical philanthropy in the country; the first African American dean of the college at Lewis & Clark, an elite, private liberal arts college in the Pacific Northwest; and, the first African American president of St. Mary's College of Maryland, one of the best undergraduate institutions in the country, tucked away in a place that paradoxically has a proud history as the site of religious toleration as well as a dark history of racial tension and inequality.

No, the College is not at a critical point in its history because an African American female is leading it. The College is at a critical point in its history because, once again, the College has been in a tumultuous period and a woman has emerged to take control of the situation. A few short years ago, the College made national headlines for missing its enrollment target. In reality, the College should not have made national headlines for simply missing its target but the sensationalism was due, in part, to an eroded

relationship with the media. The underlying problems associated with missing the target were complicated, complex, and, unfortunately, predictable. Additionally, there were both internal and external factors that contributed to the turmoil. These things, coupled with the economic downturn and the subsequent, and yes predictable, national discourse about the value of a liberal education, sent the College into a tailspin. Interestingly, this type of discourse always surfaces when there is an economic downturn. When times are hard or challenging, our nation becomes myopic in identifying quick solutions to complex, long-term problems. Thus, what we have now is an emphasis on skill development so that people can find jobs when, in the long-term, what is really required is an emphasis on a balanced education that creates careers. I could go on and on about the debate surrounding skill development and education but not tonight. Tonight I am supposed to be focused on celebrating women and that I will!

The public discourse over the last few years has taken its toll on colleges around the country. The recently announced pending closure of Sweet Briar College, a small women's college in rural Virginia, has the popular press asking the question, does this closure signify the demise of small, rural institutions across the country? It is this kind of generalization that sparks turmoil, chaos, and irrational behavior. In this day and time of public concern about the cost of higher education, increased federal mandates for accountability, and decreased funding for higher education, *all* colleges and universities, except the wealthiest, are subject to difficult times. Those institutions with strong and capable leaders who 1) work to maintain

excellent and forward-focused programs, 2) recruit high quality faculty and staff as well as students who can succeed in the college's environment, and 3) work to maintain and develop close and productive ties to their communities will remain relevant and viable. It is new day at St. Mary's College. I have been at the helm of this institution for eight months and in that very short period of time I have witnessed what an associate at the College calls the winds of change. St. Mary's College has maintained its excellence during this period of uncertainty and the good news is that **Hope**, in the form of new and "stable" leadership, has returned to the College.

What is it about being a woman that gives us the wisdom or ability to stand in the background and play a supportive role when things are "in order" and then step in, as Washington Irving wrote, "in the dark hour of adversity" to lead when chaos emerges? Could it be the power of X? It is a fact that we are the gender determined by XX chromosomes. Perhaps it is the X factor that allows us, as leaders, to remain calm in the midst of chaos, to see light in the midst of darkness, to hold fast to our dreams in the midst of hopelessness, to be confident in the midst of uncertainty, and to insist upon treating humankind with respect and dignity in the midst of incivility, inequality, and inequity. We saw this when Drew Gilpin Faust replaced Larry Summers as president of Harvard. It manifested itself when Melinda French married Bill Gates and spearheaded the development of the Bill and

Melinda Gates Foundation. We are seeing it today in countless communities across the country and around the globe.

As I sit and reflect upon the future of the College, an institution that will be celebrating its 175th year of existence in this, the 16th year of the 21st century, I am confident that we will get to a much better place. The college community is ready to move beyond the here and now and to look towards the future – a future filled with partnerships and collaborations that must extend beyond the campus, a future that educates our students to be civil and humane leaders working towards a more just society for all, a future that provides our students with a holistic educational experience that fosters creativity and innovation as they work to solve the problems of the day with an eye towards an uncertain future. The external community is working to look beyond our recent missteps and to embrace our efforts to continue to be a significant and valued partner within the region. In our past is the history of many women, women of complexity and strength, women who reflect the beauty of this place, women who are a reflection of *you*, the honorees. Our future is bright and that is due, in no small part, to the Power of X.

Congratulations to all of the honorees. I wish you much continued success in everything you do. Thank you.

Tuajuanda C. Jordan, PhD
President, St. Mary's College of Maryland
Keynote Address

The St. Mary's County Commission for Women
Women's History Banquet

ⁱ During the presentation, Christine Wray was mistakenly identified as Kathy O'Brien

ⁱⁱ Patricia Radigan and Patricia Riley Dunlap, "The Culture That Created a College" in *St. Mary's College of Maryland Magazine*, Vol. XX, No. 2, pp. 5-7, 1999