

## **Hollins Welcome Reception**

**February 21, 2020**

---

Thank you for your incredibly generous introduction. I offer my gratitude to each of you for being here today and for such a warm and hospitable welcome. I am so very grateful to the presidential search committee and the Hollins University board of trustees for extending this leadership invitation to me. As I have shared with you, I will endeavor each day to be a reflection of the mission of this community. I would also like to publicly thank the cabinet who have been so warm and supportive. And, a very special thank you to Nancy Gray, in whom I so clearly see the heart of Hollins and for whom I am truly grateful.

I am honored to join the Hollins University community and look forward to talking with each and every one of you and getting to know you, both professionally and personally. On behalf of my husband, Robert, and our children, Hallela, Hillel, and Hosanna, thank you for the opportunity to serve your community. I look forward to sharing who I am - and who my family is – with each of you. We are excited to embrace Hollins and to call Roanoke, VA, home.

I grew up approximately 147 miles southeast of here, in a small community called Kittrell, NC. It is a fairly typical small southern community. The train goes through on occasion. There is a job corps training facility. There used to be farms. And, as we all do, the people there, my people, yearn for something more, something better, something filled with hope.

In that small, rural community, I grew up in a home filled with love but that was our most abundant – and often times only – resource. Yet our focus was never on what we lacked. Rather, my mother intentionally focused us on the idea that we had much more than other people. While that argument could not be made regarding material possessions, she always said that because you are able to think clearly you have an obligation to give back to others. I can recall this statement being made when we were at home, being dropped off for school, even in the grocery store. It always came back to the fact that you aren't defined by material objects but by your intellectual resources. Of even greater importance was that we utilize those resources in support of another.

From my very earliest days, I was taught that my purpose in life is to serve others. I didn't know how that would unfold and I certainly never envisioned leadership at this level. Indeed, I had ambitious dreams but like so many who grow up in poverty, or who grow up feeling less than or marginalized, for whatever reasons, I was careful with whom, and how, I shared my dreams in order to protect them and myself.

You see, according to Raj Chetty's Opportunity Atlas, on average, my cohort of classmates from Kittrell who share my particular demographic had a greater than 50% teen pregnancy rate, today have a median individual income of \$21,000, and only 21% of us graduated from college. Sadly, I didn't need a Harvard economist to tell me that, though. We understood the structural injustice. We lived inequity daily. That's who I am and yet, somehow, I have the privilege of standing here with you today.

So, what changed my life? What allows me to stand here today? What altered my zip code destiny as it's called? To be clear, I have the privilege of being with you not because I was smarter than or richer than my classmates. I have this privilege today for two reasons: I had a group of people who believed in me and told me I could be something. And, most importantly, because I was able to access an education. A liberal arts education.

I am not being hyperbolic when I say that the liberal arts saved my life. I have shared many times that there is not a single doubt in my mind that had I not been exposed to the liberal arts I would not be here today. Yes, I learned how to think, how to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge. But even more, a liberal arts education is about our relationships with learning and with people. For me, it was a faculty member who saw beyond my poverty, my complete lack of social capital, and my insecurity. The fact that she saw me and gently said you can do this, that made a transformative difference in my life. She wasn't a president, she wasn't a department chair and I don't know if she'd ever even been to a diversity training. What I do know is that she was willing to see my humanity and insist that the great values of the liberal arts tradition could change the trajectory of my life. She enabled me to know that there was a bigger world than the dirt farms I'd known to that point. She equipped me to believe that if I could think expansively, and find creative ways to apply that thinking, I could do anything.

I know that this is what you do every day here at Hollins, within and outside of the classroom. Whether it's for our core academic enterprise for women at the

undergraduate level, in our critically important graduate program, the Horizon program, athletics program, the fine arts, the riding center and beyond, you transform lives. Having been a young woman transformed by an education – and then able to impact the lives of others - is what drives my commitment to the mission of Hollins University.

So as we begin our work together my call is for each of us to lead so that every student on our campus has a champion who believes in them and the transformative power of the liberal arts. My call is that we embrace the fact that we change lives because of who we are and what we do as a liberal arts institution.

The liberal arts transforms for those who have every material need met but still question their worth. The liberal arts develops the skills needed to help those who have great ambitions access opportunities. For some young women, the validation of their hopes and dreams, and being equipped by the liberal arts to pursue those without apology, is what we do. For those who have very few resources the liberal arts expand your world and compel you to expand the worlds of others. The liberal arts – and Hollins - transforms lives.

In fact, Charles Cocks' original sentiment for Hollins indicated, "This institution is not designed to be a resort for the pleasure-seeking, the idle, and the profligate but shall be *sacred to the cultivation of sound learning, virtuous feelings, and independent thought.*" Sound learning, virtuous feelings, and independent thought. The liberal arts.

This is remarkably beautiful and resonant language though I know I was not who our founder envisioned. But one cannot understand the future without knowing the past; both its beauty and its pain. So I began to know Hollins with the founding vision. You see, the past offers touchstones that frame who and what we want to become, it signals what we must never again allow, and reveals parts of ourselves that must not be compromised. My reference to the original mission is not to excuse the pain or ignore the systematic injustice of the time, but to excavate the highest academic principles and recast them for all. We will implement a vision for those our founders may have never imagined, as we work to ensure that every student on our campus is seen, heard, valued and able to accomplish her grandest aspirations.

In order to do this we must, collectively and collaboratively, work together to build a future that enables us to not only continue to serve every student with distinction but to do so in a way that is sustainable and that leverages our strengths. This opportunity for mission-driven growth is not a new one for Hollins. Bessie Carter Randolph, Class of 1912 and former president, wrote: “The foundations of life and learning must be deeply laid in the liberal arts – in knowledge, wisdom and understanding – in that rich, inalienable heritage, that precious residuum of human experience must furnish the guide to the far-off ends of human destiny. Higher institutions must, if they are to survive, adhere with unflinching faith to the long-run task of preparing thinkers, never selling truth to serve the hour.” We will be unflinching in our faith to our long-run task as we seek new opportunities for our shared success. We will determine, as a

community, what cannot be compromised. We will create space for that which may be new and invigorating.

Hollins has done much, under the success of many leaders and everyone who comprises the community, to achieve its goals over time. And we, all of us here today, no matter our role, will continue that legacy. Today we take up the grandest ambitions of the institution and with a sharpened lens of innovation, imagination and inclusion, we envision who we want to become. To that end, over the next few months I want to hear your hopes, dreams, fears, and ambitions. I will hold them in my mind and, even more so, gently in my heart.

Together, we will create a collective vision. Our vision will transform and inspire us. In that ultimate vision I won't see my entire reflection. Likewise, when you look at it you may not see your full reflection, either. But if we look closely, if we look at the values articulated; the strategies indicated; and, the ways in which we will measure ourselves, I feel confident that we will see one another. Our vision will reflect a community of people committed to a unified cause: the liberal arts education of young women and excellent co-educational graduate programs.

Developing this vision will require active engagement; the of nurturing trust and confidence; and working with a sense of urgency balanced with a sense of thoughtful deliberation. It will require us to be open and invite change, while maintaining the soul of who we are. It will require we journey together with purpose and hope.

Annie Dillard, Class of 1967, wrote, “New ideas come in and out, new information and theories, and Hollins stirs with excitement, as it always has. New buildings arise, new leaders emerge, new talent pours into the freshman class, and it’s still Hollins: where girls become women, where students have time to learn in depth and professors have time to give them, where the grass is green and the mountains are blue, where friendships thrive, minds catch fire, careers begin and hearts open to a world of possibility.”

I look forward to partnering with each of you to secure, nurture and sustain the students, faculty and staff who are the soul of Hollins. I look forward to our hearts open to a world of possibility. I will endeavor, each day, to ensure those new ideas, information and theories, serve our students and our mission first and foremost.

Thank you for entrusting me with the community. Thank you for partnering with me. Thank you for believing in and living, each day, the power of our mission.

In the spirit of our school motto, *Levavi Oculos*, I will lift up my eyes to the hills for you. I will lift up my eyes to the hills with you. I will lift up my eyes to the hills because of you. Thank you.