

June 2004

Commencement Address for Lincoln School

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The Power of One

Thank you

Thank you to the senior class for inviting me here today.

And thank you to the Lincoln School community for creating this special place that empowers women and creates leaders and feminists.

You give me hope.

Let me share with you what Jessica Ricardo said to me in her letter inviting me here today: “We are taught diligence, honesty, respect, and excellence. Through your efforts with the Women’s Fund of RI, we see in you the qualities of a Lincoln woman.”

I am complimented to be called a Lincoln woman and am very proud to be here with you today.

I want to begin where Jessica’s letter began – with honesty – seeing and telling the truth.

Since I was a child – when I look at the world and my own community, wherever I live – I see injustice. There is economic and social injustice. Educational and political injustice. There is racism and sexism and homophobia.

I ask you to look at the world honestly. Look at your own community here in RI and wherever you go next. Look and see what is happening.

I’m talking about seeing the need for change – the need to work for fairness and opportunity...the need to champion shared power and responsibility in all areas of your personal life and the lives of the people around you – economic, cultural, educational, social, and political fairness and opportunity. (And by the way, that is the mission of the Women’s Fund.)

And why the need for change? Because the playing field is NOT level yet.

There are too many people – in Rhode Island and in the U.S. and around the world – who are denied their basic human rights – who experience bias because they are women or people of

color, because of their level of affluence or education, because of their sexual orientation and more.

Let me share with you some stories

Story #1: Barb

A few years ago, my friend Barb discovered that she was being paid significantly less as a development officer than a man in her organization. Since the start of her job there, Barb had received stellar performance reviews. She had the same level of accountability and work as the man.

Barb talked to her boss and he couldn't explain why but he wouldn't make a change. She filed a complaint and won a settlement.

She got back pay for gender bias. But she left the organization because people disrespected her for being a troublemaker.

Barb spoke up for herself and spoke out for all women. And while she got the money she was owed – she was, finally, punished for speaking out.

Story #2: What boys think about girls

There is a man named Michael Kimmel. He is a masculinity expert and works with people around the country. He always asks this question in his nationwide workshops with boys: What does it mean to be a man?

There are 13 answers that have remained constant during these workshops around the country. They are:

<i>Pressure</i>	<i>Don't be a girl</i>	<i>Don't cry</i>	<i>Don't ask</i>
<i>Strong</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Silent</i>	
<i>Independent</i>	<i>Confident</i>	<i>Don't do it</i>	
<i>Bully</i>	<i>Denial of feelings</i>	<i>Power</i>	

Think about what this means – that boys say being a man means being a bully, being strong, having power, getting sex, and not being a girl.

About a decade ago, the Michigan Board of Education published a statewide survey of students' perceptions of what it means to be male or female.

- Nearly 50% of the girls spoke of the advantages of being a boy
- Only 7% of the boys saw advantages to being a girl
- Nearly 20% of the boys gave extremely hostile, derogatory responses when thinking of being a girl.
- An alarming number of boys said that they would commit suicide if they suddenly awoke to find they were girls.

Surely this is the most fundamental description of gender bias: that boys don't want to be girls because girls are not powerful enough; because boys see girls as a disadvantaged group.

I find this chilling – and it is not the exception but rather the rule. This bias continues when boys and girls become adults.

And keep in mind: Gender bias is displayed not by men only but by women too. For example: Women complained that Dr. Judy Steinberg, Howard Dean's wife, didn't join him on the campaign trail. Instead, she chose to stay home and treat her patients.

Story #3: Dear Abby – a woman as president

I quote from a letter to the advice columnist, Abby: "I am a 13-year-old girl in the 8th grade. For a class, I had to do an oral report about my future career.

"I have wanted to be president of the U.S. since 5th grade. But when I said that, my teacher laughed and said I had little chance of making it. He didn't say why. Then another student started laughing and said girls aren't allowed to be president."

What a sad testament!

The first women's movement – the suffragettes during the Civil War and then World War I were just trying to get the vote. (See *Iron Jawed Maidens* from HBO.)

The women's movement of my youth – the 70s – hoped for a woman president in 20 years.

Now, more than 30 years later – and a girl is laughed at by her male teacher and her classmates.

A female journalist speaking in March at Bryant College's Women's Summit said she thought it would be another 20 years before we have a female president.

(By the way, there are women presidents / premiers and heads of state in other countries around the world – and there have been for decades. What's going on in the U.S.?)

Story #4: Rosa Parks

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks got on the bus to go home after work. Mrs. Parks joined the black men and women who were occupying the rear seats, designated for people of color. Eventually, another white passenger boarded the bus and the driver told the blacks to give up their seats and stand. That was the law.

When Rosa Parks refused to move she was arrested and jailed.

The local women's political organization distributed a leaflet urging "every Negro" to stay off the buses in protest of the arrest and trial.

The blacks of Montgomery Alabama boycotted buses for 361 days -- through a bitterly cold winter.

And on December 20, 1956, segregation of buses was declared unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

That's the power that started with one action – the choice of one person, a woman. The power of one.

Each of these stories is about social injustice – in particular, racism and sexism.

And I could tell you more stories about social injustice.

Never think that racism, homophobia, classism, etc. are NOT women's issues. Any human rights issue is a woman's issue because no one is free until everyone is free.

So the challenge to each of us is: Will we acknowledge the barriers to social justice and share in the work of removing these barriers? Will we exercise the power of one?

And you give me hope.

In May I attended my first Board of Visitors Day here at Lincoln School. I heard women from your upper school talk about how they learn to speak honestly and how they are nourished as leaders – whether they are quiet or louder leaders.

Your classmates that day said:

- “Don't hold back.” And
- “Leadership and community go hand in hand.”

These comments give me hope.

So I ask you to do 4 things as you graduate from Lincoln School:

#1: First I ask you to remember that we do not have social justice in Rhode Island or in the U.S. or in the world.

- We who are white at this graduation today are born with a privilege that our colleagues of color do not have.
- We who are heterosexual are born with a privilege that our gay and lesbian colleagues do not have.
- And we women are automatically deposed because of male privilege.
- There is bias – a lot – still today. This is documented fact, not opinion.
- These are all human rights issues and so these are women's issues too.

#2: Second, I ask that you remember the values of the Lincoln School community and live them. Look honestly at your community, no matter where you are living. Then as leaders, claim your power.

Demand power. Take it. And empower others. Remember what Frederick Douglass, the African American abolitionist said: “If there is no struggle there is no progress. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

#3: Third, be courageous. Don’t hold back. Speak out. Question and challenge. Remember silence is consent. And the old English definition of courage is: speaking your mind while telling your heart.

A long time ago, I learned to speak out and made a commitment to myself to do so. Often it isn’t easy. I didn’t have your experience here at Lincoln to nurture me and support me – but my parents taught me well.

I make the choice every day to speak out – with I hope passion and candor and integrity. I talk about social justice issues like gender bias and racism and homophobia.

I talk about how privilege – the privilege of race and gender and sexual orientation and education and affluence – gives the privileged unfair power in our society.

And some people criticize me – both men and women!

- They say I am too militant but I am trying to be fair and just.
- They tell me I am too radical – but I think I am honest.
- These women and men tell me that everything is fixed and fine for women and girls and people of color and lesbians and gays – but I know they are wrong.

So I speak out because I believe that I can do no less – most especially because I am privileged except in my gender. So I have an obligation.

#4: And finally, I ask you to vote.

Just speaking out is not enough. Leaders vote. And leaders demand that their parents and friends and sisters and brothers and neighbors and co-workers vote.

In closing...

I started out by saying that you give me hope. And that’s the way I want to end.

You give me hope that together we can create a socially just Rhode Island, U.S. and world. You say that leadership and community go hand in hand. I agree.

Exercise your power of one and join with others to be an even greater power.

Remember, it's not just about the famous people like Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr. and Gloria Steinem.

This is really about you and me and people like us. Just speaking out and taking action in our own personal way very day.

I believe that if a girl from Lincoln School had been in the classroom of the 13-year old telling her dream to become president – one of you would have spoken out and told the teacher that he was wrong. I believe you would have told her classmates to stop laughing.

In order for me to have hope, I must believe that you will vote and protest and speak out in the grocery store, at the party, with your friends, at your job, and in your homes.

That is leadership and courage.

So I end with one of my favorite stories that I tell as often as I can.

I want you to imagine the world that you can help create.

It's 24 hours before you were born. A genie appears and says: "You get to set the rules of the society into which you will be born. You can set the economic rules and the social rules and all the other rules. The rules you set will apply during your lifetime and for the lifetime of your children and even grandchildren.

Just imagine how thrilled you are with this offer! But you're smart. You ask, "What's the catch?"

And the genie says: "You don't know if you're going to be born poor or rich, White or of color, infirm or able bodied or infirm, retarded or intelligent, homosexual or heterosexual, or female or male.

So what rules do you want?" [From: *A Theory of Justice*, by John Rawls, 1971; told by Warren Buffett; modified somewhat by Joyaux.]

I know what rules I want – equity and social justice for all. I know what I expect of leaders and community.

You are the next generation of hope. You can make sure there is a female president before 20 more years. You can change the minds of boys and men and women and girls too.

I believe that I can count on you.

I look forward to working with you to create a revolution for social justice – not just in Rhode Island or the U.S., but also throughout the world.