

515/94
Dale Ferguson Commentaries

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

June 15, 1994

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT DUKE ELLINGTON SCHOOL FOR THE PERFORMING ARTS
WASHINGTON, D.C.

MRS. CLINTON: Well, I don't know about all of you, but I think we can just quit right now. I feel like I've had one of the best evenings in a very long time.

I want to thank Eli and Naisha (phonetic) for the best introduction done ensemble that I have ever had and ever will have. I am grateful for you for that. I want to thank Mrs. Cafritz and her (inaudible), Mr. Malone (phonetic), for realizing their dream and yours through this marvelous school and all that it represents.

Principal Wilson and representatives of the school board and board members and all of you who are gathered for this special evening, I know that you join me in a feeling of pride and even of teary eyes as I watched all of the graduates coming in, and I was privileged to get here early enough to see your performance, and I could not help but be moved by all of it, but particularly the finale. This indeed is your night. Tonight is yours, and I hope every other night from now into the future gives you the same joy that you gave all of us.

On behalf of the President, I want to extend my congratulations on 20 remarkable years, and I hope that today's editorial in the Washington Post will galvanize this community so that this school continues to be a symbol of excellence of public schools and will flourish and thrive for many years to come. All of us who have seen the results of Ellington's work should join with the supporters of Ellington to make sure that work not only continues but grows in strength.

As you probably know, I live with a President who has an abiding interest and love of the arts. It was given to him as a young child by teachers such as the ones that you

MORE

have enjoyed here at this school. He loves music. We love together painting and museums. We love theater. We know that in a very deep way the arts represents the very soul of our nation.

And what Ellington has done is to represent young people who are fulfilling their dreams as artists and performers, and I was particularly proud that you had a role to play in the festivities honoring the Emperor and Empress of Japan, and they personally spoke to me about how impressed they were by your choir, and, after hearing you tonight, I certainly can understand that.

By now, most of you have discovered the power of human hope and imagination. Where there is imagination, there is always hope. Where there is potential for creative expression, there is always the possibility for human progress. I believe, as I know you do, that all forms of art -- music, dance, literature, painting, sculpture, poetry -- all of it has an enormous capacity to affect not only your individual lives but the lives of your larger community.

Art is not beyond. It moves people. It encourages people. It puzzles people. It provokes people. You have at your fingertips, because of your talent and your dedication and your hard work, the opportunity to not only explore your own potential but to influence people far beyond.

I was very moved to receiving the painting. It will come with me back to the White House, where it will hang in a place of honor. And I was very touched to receive the sculpture. Those two pieces of artistic work, standing on their own, carry meaning. You know, because of what you have given your lives to, that you've had to have a lot of discipline to get where you are. You've made a lot of risks and sacrifices and taken on a lot of responsibilities.

Now the question is, what will you do with all that you have been given and all that you have taken? As you look to the future, I hope you will remember there are many things that distinguish artists and performers from the rest of us, but there are at least three I would like to mention.

First, artists are willing to make sacrifices. That's something you already know because many of you have already done that. Peggy mentioned the VPIs award and Children's Defense Fund. I know from my own experience that

MORE

many of you have already overcome great odds and have been willing to make sacrifices for your education and your art.

Second, artists are willing to take risks. They are willing to expose their ideas, their visions, their emotions to outside scrutiny in ways that other people are not. It takes courage and it takes guts to be an artist. And I hope that you will always celebrate your willingness to take risks on behalf of your art.

Robin Smith (phonetic), the president of the student body, talked recently about the hard lessons she had learned here. She said, "I have learned to accept criticism, and if you don't learn that you shouldn't go on with your career." I might add that being open to criticism means being open to learning and growing. As someone who gets more than, I think, my fair share of criticism, I have to echo Ms. Smith's words. You have to learn to accept criticism. But I would add to what she said, learn to accept it seriously but not personally. Do not let anyone else's opinion of you or your work (inaudible).

The third point of distinction I would like to share with you is that perhaps because the work of artists and performers reflects, in the words of the painter Romer Beardon (phonetic), "the soul of the people," you do have an added responsibility to make a positive difference in society. This is always the subject of commencement speeches, but in your case it is more dramatic and perhaps even more immediate than it is for the usual graduates.

For your generation, the future holds great promise and great peril, great peril because we only have to look around us to see that the world still has too much poverty, too much racism, too much violence, too much indifference, too many of the things we have struggled with since the very beginning of time.

But there are great promises embodied in the lives of every one of us, and particularly in your lives. You have what I hope you will always hold onto, what someone once called "a hard-earned optimism." I know that many of you sit here often thinking in the past four years that you might not be able to stay the course. I know that there were times when it didn't seem worth it, when you didn't feel you had the support that you needed or thought you deserved from family and friends. But it was your optimism, your willingness to

MORE

keep going that really at the root is what will make your promise ripple out into a great promise for the larger society.

That means you must have a vision of life that does not ignore the tough realities but is based on those tough realities but is infused with hope. You know, an attitude about one's ability to take responsibility and contribute to society can be yours no matter what your personal circumstances might be. And I would only say to you what I believe with all my heart, what I see my husband doing every day, and that is, never, never give up, no matter how many obstacles are thrown in your way.

Giving up, especially when you have the talent that you all have, is an indulgence. And you only have to look at the events of the last month to realize why it is never appropriate to give up. Think for a minute about the inauguration of Nelson Mandela.

If there were ever a man who had reason to give up, it certainly was he. Twenty-seven years, longer than you have been alive, he spent in prison. I had the extraordinary privilege of attending his inauguration. I hope you saw much of the television coverage of that historic event. But I want to tell you what personally made the single biggest impression on me.

Yes, I was overwhelmed by the inaugural ceremonies, by the sight of Nelson Mandela mounting the stairs, surrounded by the military leaders of South Africa who were now part of a new constitutional government. But what really moved me and what said more to me about his greatness than anything else was what he said at a function after the inaugural, when he stood before a very large crowd of visiting dignitaries and other people from around the world and told us that he had invited to his inaugural three of his former jailers.

Stop and think about that for a minute. I felt a rush of emotion like I have never experienced. I sat there thinking, this man is great because he has learned the basic lessons of what it is to be a human being filled with hope, who continues to forgive, never to forget, but always to forgive, because a hopeful heart has no room for bitterness, has no room for vengeance, has no room for (inaudible).

And I thought to myself, if this man in this

MORE

extraordinary act of humanity could overcome bitterness and invite his three jailers to his inaugural, certainly every one of us could change our own hearts and our own minds and begin to live with that same level of hopefulness.

And then, last week, the President and I were in Europe to celebrate the lives and sacrifices of many of your grandparents and uncles and others who lived and fought and maybe even died during World War Two. We saw many there who had survived that particular conflict, but I want to tell you about one particular gentleman.

He's not a famous person, but he is a very important man. His name is Woodrow Profitt (phonetic). He was a member of a very significant group called the Tuskegee Airmen, young African American men who believed they were as good as anybody else. Who believed in the promise of democracy and freedom and decided they wanted to make their contribution, and they formed themselves into the Tuskegee Airmen.

And if you followed any of the TV coverage of the invasion of Europe, you may have heard that in the two months before D-Day, 2,000 planes, 12,000 men were shot down over Europe by the Germans. The Tuskegee Airmen, who flew fighter planes that were to protect bombers making those bombing runs, never lost a single bomber. And I asked Mr. Profitt, how, in the face of the extraordinary attacks that were going on, did the Tuskegee Airmen never lose a single bomber? And he said, "That's because we knew our job, we stayed in formation, and we took care of each other." Pretty good words to live by (inaudible).

And those words echoed for me when I heard these words from someone who not only plays beautiful music, but has a lot to tell us, namely, Wynton Marsalis. Wynton Marsalis says, "Life is like playing the blues." So, in ending, let me pass on his advice. And it is as follows: "Always bring your horn. Know the tune. Learn to listen with empathy. Understand your role in the ensemble. And, most of all, enjoy playing."

Think about your own lives in that light, and go forth from this celebration with optimism and hope, courage and confidence to chart your own courses. Many people have invested in you, and I think it's an investment that has been very well made. God bless you, and good luck, everyone.

MORE

(End of speech.)

* * * * *

MORE