

BELLE: A CLARION CALL
FOR EXCELLENCE AND EQUALITY:
RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW

INAUGURAL REMARKS

DR. JULIANNE MALVEAUX

15TH PRESIDENT, BENNETT COLLEGE FOR WOMEN

MARCH 29, 2008

This is the day which the LORD hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.....It is my great pleasure to greet you with all of my heart to this most significant occasion. Thank you sister Mayor Yvonne Johnson an alumna who is Chair of our Board of Trustees and Mayor of the City of Greensboro. Welcome to members of our Board of Trustees who are able to be with us today. Thank you Trustee Gracie Coleman for your wise council and management of the succession team. I welcome our treasure, the students of Bennett College for Women for whom we engage in the work of providing a quality educational experience. Thank you to the faculty and staff for your dedicated service and to the Greensboro community my appreciation for the warmth of your reception.

To those Bennett College presidents who have preceded me I bring you the warmest personal greetings. And to my family a very special thank you. My mother Proteone Alexandria Malveaux; my siblings Mariette, Marianne and Antoinette; my nephews Anyi Malik and Armand Marcus Howell; the San Francisco contingent of women who have nurtured, loved, and challenged me Doris Ward, Willie Kennedy, Frankie Gillette, Carol Tatum and Altheda Carrie; my Atlanta family, my godchild Matthew Brown and Nia, Cheryl and Mark Brown, my B&P sisters, my Delta sisters, and oh, so many friends.

To all of those I have not mentioned please accept my apology and know that I care deeply for you. If time permitted I would like to acknowledge all of our students for each possess a unique and special characteristic worthy of note. A special acknowledgement to our seniors who have been most affected by this transition and participated with me during this time of adjustment.

I would especially lift up Shaunte Smith, a senior from Brooklyn, New York who was admitted, just a week ago, at the Harvard Divinity School. Shaunte is a spirit-led scholar whose GPA of **3.74** speaks to the priority she gives to her studies. Her campus leadership provides a glimpse of what we might expect from her in the future, and what this means to all of us. She is well prepared to receive the baton, which we must pass to the next generation of intellectually talented and ethically strong Bennett women. We expect her to be among those issuing the clarion call for excellence and equality into the future.

I am humbled today as I reflect on the history and heritage for which I am truly blessed, the history and heritage that I honor and that led me, in so many ways to this role at Bennett College for Women. Many years ago I met Dr. Dorothy Irene Height in an airport terminal. At the time I was contemplating

pledging Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. I was all of 19, and I had no way of knowing that this gracious and extraordinary leader would become and remain such an important part of my life. Dr. Height reminds us “black women don’t do what they want to do, but what they have to do”. Thank you, Dorothy Height. Susan Taylor and I also go “way back” and the constant between us has been the way I have always been touched by her grace, gentle spirit, and uplifting words. Sue has chosen a new path and committed her substantial energy to service of our at risk youth through her National Mentoring Cares movement and our nation will be grateful for the difference that she makes. Dr. Maya Angelou, whose rich love and resonant voice has been such a blessing to all of us. We thank you and acknowledge your generosity to Bennett College for Women. Dr. Maya serves on our board of trustees and continues to inspire all who come to know her. Mrs. Cora Masters Barry, whose tenacious zeal for transforming young lives is infectious. Her youth advocacy has made a tremendous difference so many, including some present here today.

I call names not to call the roll of friends, but to acknowledge that, in this Women’s History Month, history is being made among us. There are heroes in our midst, women (and a few good men) who contribute so very much to the work we must do to open doors, close gaps, model excellence and provide opportunity. It is important to pay tribute to those who went before, because this installation is about honoring the past, embracing the present, envisioning the future. I wear this medallion in the spirit of the sankofa bird, the Akan symbol that means, “We must go back and reclaim our past so we can move forward; so we can understand how and why we came to be who we are today.” In tribute to this month, let me call a few more names, Lulann Sapp McGriff, who was President of the San Francisco NAACP when she died a decade ago, who worked tirelessly on education issues in San Francisco. My own grandmother, Rose Elizabeth Nelson, who graduated from Tuskegee and who instilled a love of education into the lives of her children and grandchildren. Dr. Sadie Tanner Mosell Alexander, the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in economics in this nation. Dr. Phyllis Ann Wallace, my mentor, the recipient of the Cross Medal from Yale University, and the first African American woman to earn a Ph.D. in economics there. Women’s history.

We have to look back to move forward. To prepare for this speech, it will surprise few to learn that I started with my nose in a book. I specifically set a day aside to read Paula Giddings’ excellent new biography of Ida B. Wells, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*. Why Ida B. Wells? Because in so many ways

her story, speaks to the passion for justice, the resilient determination to be heard, the audacity to believe that pen and voice make a difference, the temerity to conquer every challenge. The Ida B. Wells story is the African American woman's story, a story of determination, of achievement against all odds, a story of overcoming so very much in order to make a lasting contribution to a people. Ida B. Wells was born in 1862; Bennett College in 1873. What is the connection?

The Bennett story formally began in 1873, but it really began the first time that enslaved women demanded knowledge, the first time that, despite the law, somebody taught somebody else to read. We may not know the names of the teachers or the students because history belongs to those who write it; history too often swallows black women's lives. But there is Phyllis Wheatley, our first published poet. Who taught her? There is Maria Stewart, the first black woman to lecture about women's rights, especially the rights of black women, and the first black woman public speaker. And there Harriet, Jacobs, the Edenton, North Carolina enslaved woman who wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861. How did this woman, born in North Carolina in 1813, manage to learn to read, to write, to publish? In her book, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and in Freedom*, UNC Chapel Hill Professor Andrea Williams writes that the law prevented enslaved people from learning, but we did it anyway. The General Assembly of the State of North Carolina passed a law, in the 1830-31 session that reads, in part, "Whereas the teaching of slaves to read and write has a tendency to **excite dissatisfaction** in their minds, and to produce insurrection and rebellion, to the manifest injury of the citizens of the state: Therefore,

(1) Be it enacted by the General Assembly of the State of North Carolina and it is hereby enacted by the authority of the same, that any free person who shall hereafter teach or attempt to teach, any slave within this State to read or write, the use of figures excepted, or shall give to or sell to such slave any books or pamphlets, shall be liable to indictment in any court of record in this state having jurisdiction thereof, and upon conviction shall, at the discretion of the court, if a white man or women, be fined not less than one hundred dollars, not more than two hundred dollars or imprisonment; and if a free person of color, shall be fined, imprisoned, or whipped at the discretion of the court, not exceeding thirty nine lashes, nor less than twenty lashes..

Reading, learning to read, teaching someone to read was a revolutionary action, an act designed, in the words of the law to "excite dissatisfaction". This excitement of dissatisfaction, the will to read, to break

the law to read, were the very seeds harvested when former slaves sat in the unpaved basement of St. Matthews church and planned the development of this college.

This excitement of dissatisfaction was the forerunner, the foundation, of the clarion call that is issued today, an urgent call for all of us to move closer to excellence and equality, right here, right now.

What is the urgency?

These times dictate an urgency. . Our country will suffer economically unless we choose to invest in the educational enterprise, to value what every single brain brings to the table. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are in a high-stakes race for the Democratic nomination for President of the United States, which is evidence that some of the barriers referenced in the 1830 code have been leveled. Of course, we have come a long way. But China, India and Eastern Europe out produce the US in math, science and engineering. Our economy is shedding jobs as millions contemplate home foreclosures and bankruptcy. More than 8 million Americans who want work can't find it. An unemployment rate of nearly five percent seems modest until we realize that millions are out of the labor force because they don't think they can find work. And a five percent unemployment rate for everyone means a nearly ten percent unemployment rate for African American people. These economic times dictate urgency. They excite dissatisfaction. Women continue to earn less than men, even though they may perform the same work. Further, women of color carry a third burden when, structurally, African American men are treated differentially. A million more African American women work than black men do. Some would call it blessing, but others recognize the burden African American women shoulder by taking on a disproportionate amount of the economic responsibility in our communities. In these economic times, you don't have to excite dissatisfaction. You have to organize and educate for a more productive future.

I belong to a small group of men and women who lead communities that bear the responsibility for developing many of the great minds so essential for our nation's survival. They are the presidents of our nation's community of colleges and universities. I belong to an even smaller group that do this work against all odds, joined by the historical mission to educate those that majority America once refused to educate, indeed, made it illegal to educate, and that is the group of presidents of historically black colleges and universities. Some of them are here with us today, Dr. Swinton, Dr. Tatum, and others.

Would all of the presidents with us today please stand and be recognized. And I am blessed to stand on the shoulders of a mighty fourteen men and women who laid the groundwork for the work we must do as we move Bennett College from good to great. **Would all of the former presidents of Bennett College for Women please stand and be recognized.**

Dr. David Dallas Jones was the tenth president of the college. He was known for his vision, and for his mentorship. Not only did he inspire and motivate the students with his famous exhortation, “Young woman what is your purpose,” but also he selected Willa Player as his successor and nurtured her in her leadership.

Dr. Willa B. Player was the college’s first woman president. She is legendary for her genteel grace, ladylike demeanor, and steely leadership of the college during some of the most tumultuous political times. Dr. Player brought Martin Luther King to Greensboro to speak on the Bennett campus when no one else would. She was known for reminding people that a liberal education taught people how to think, not what to think. Dr. Player spoke truth to power, not with a raised fist but with a gloved hand. Yet she supported her students when they fought for civil rights, and asserted that she would, if she had to, give final exams in jail. The foundation for the activism of this generation’s Belles may have begun with the excitement of dissatisfaction that came from resisting 1830 law, but it was cemented when Dr. Player embraced and encouraged activism among her students.

Dr. Isaac Miller brought children to the President’s house, and computers to the campus. Dean Mary Ann Scarlette, who so graciously agreed to chair this installation celebration with Dr. Linda Brown, remembers that Kay Askew was just 9 months old when Dr. Miller came. She also remembers that the computer-assisted instruction was introduced to the campus under Dr. Miller.

International student travel increased under Dr. Gloria Randle Scott, a leader who focused on the art and science of leadership. Under Dr. Scott, the center and lifeblood of our campus, the Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel was renovated, and our work with United Methodist Women was strengthened and emphasized. Those students who matriculated under Dr. Scott describe her as a nurturer.

There are not enough words to fully describe my immediate predecessor, Dr. Johnnetta Betch Cole. The sister had fully contributed in her brilliant leadership of Spellman College and in her contribution to her field of anthropology. Her book *Gender Talk* importantly looked at the discrimination that exists into our own black community, a sexism that is woven into the very fabric of our being. Was that enough? No, Dr. Cole came out of retirement to lead Bennett College during its time of need. She tirelessly traveled from city to city raising money and awareness of our beloved oasis. She established a diversity institute that, though now independent from the college, has left a series of signature programs on campus, including a diversity lecture series, a professor of diversity in residence, and a group of diversity scholars. Dr. Cole rescued Bennett College at one of its bleakest periods in history. We are forever grateful.

Each of these leaders has contributed much to the foundation from which we now build. Each was challenged, as I am, to find the dollars to support our mission. The economic and social realities may have been different in each era, but every HBCU president is charged with making education a value proposition, something worthy of investment. The very vitality of our nation depends on the case we HBCU presidents make. The United States of America will either more fully invest in education or position ourselves for global irrelevancy. The mantra must be education or extinction. We must choose education. Our nation cannot maintain leadership or primacy in global affairs without the development and engagement of a highly educated workforce. And with our nation's shifting demographic we must focus on young people who are African American and Hispanic, the growing majority. If we do not educate this population, we will fail to shape the future of our nation. Those of us who must raise dollars to support the educational process endeavor to do so not only for our own institutions, but literally for the future of our nation. We must excite dissatisfaction about the status quo of our educational endeavor, about the children left behind by flawed legislation and insufficient commitment to our future. Our HBCUs educate nearly one in five African American students. If they didn't exist, we'd have to invent them. We are partners in our nation's progress, essential components to our nation's history. Imagine America without the contributions of an Ida B. Wells, graduate of Rust College, Beverly Buchanan, the Bennett alumna and artist whose work graces our campus in an exhibit that opened this week, or our Mayor Yvonne Johnson?

We issue a clarion call for excellence and equality at a time when our nation seems to be moving away from both. We make excuses for financial institutions, but impose standards on our nation's colleges

and universities. If Bear Sterns can get a bailout, can Bennett get a break on some of our financing? We have zero tolerance for children who act out, but due process for grown folks who ought to know better. We have state of the art jails and crumbling schools.

So where do we go from here? How do we move our college from good to great? What special skills must young women have as they move into the 21st century? How will our college look in a decade?

We move forward, embracing excellence, equality and the ferocious pace of change that is transforming our world. We move forward dedicated to the finest forms of communications excellence, teaching and speaking and writing, organized in learning communities and campus sister circles, such as those we started this semester to discuss Zora Neal Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as part of the Big Read program. We understand fully that communications skills are at the base of this endeavor.

We move our college from good to great by implementing academic programs, which reflect the challenges our students will face in the future. In order to do this we must raise funds for endowed chairs, we must attract and retain the best faculty, the best students and administrators. We must invigorate campus life by renovating our buildings and planning for the construction of dormitories, a performing arts center and additional classroom space. We must increase our investment in and use of technology.

We move from good to great understanding that political, social, cultural, spiritual and economic ties bind us to people around the world, and our curriculum must reflect that. We build our global studies program so that Bennett Belles are global Belles. We have begun to build this year, with our visiting professor Cheryl McQueen, providing a lecture series on China. Additionally, members of our team, Provost Marilyn Mobley, Dr. Gwenn Bookman, Cinnamon Hunter and others have been actively engaged in the Salzburg Center, improving our capacity in global studies. Yesterday, Rosa Whitaker, one of our Women with the Audacity to Excel Honorees, offered to work with us on our global studies offerings. And we are grateful for the involvement of former Assistant Secretary of State for Africa, Constance Berry Newman, in the work of Bennett College.

We must learn the world even as we cease to lead the world. The dollar is no longer king --- more people hold euros than dollars. Our economy is decoupling from markets overseas, with global

economies growing by as much as ten percent while ours stumbles along with two or three percent growth, at best. And trade accounts for as much as 20 percent of our GDP. Once, other economies were dependent on us. Soon, if we are not careful, we will be dependent on others. Indeed, once a US recession could signal challenges around the world. Now, with a rising Chinese middle class, that country could be unaffected by a recession in this country.

How do we move our campus from good to great? By embracing the mandate of global studies and preparing our students for a global world.

To prepare our students for a global economy, we must also expose them to entrepreneurial possibilities. Indeed as the economy fails to generate enough good jobs, it is critical that creative souls understand the value of entrepreneurship in developing opportunities both for self and community. African American women own fewer than 2 percent of our nation's businesses, yet we again stand on powerful shoulders as we develop entrepreneurial acumen. The Madame CJ Walker story is well known. Less well known is Maggie Lena Walker, the Richmond woman who, in 1903, formed the St. Luke Penny Savings Bank, which is now the Consolidated Bank and Trust Company, the oldest continually African American operated bank in the United States. Cathy Liggins Hughes took one radio station and turned into a publicly traded multi media empire of 70 stations, the largest African American controlled Media Company in the nation. This is the entrepreneurship our students must emulate, and we are committed to exploring an academic and practical foundation for that entrepreneurship.

How do we move from good to great? We are building an oasis, a sacred space, where women can grow and learn and thrive. We are building a national center for African American women, we can study those issues that affect us and that, by extension, shape the world. In this political context, one of my foci has been the third burden that African American women face, the extent to which it is foolhardy to ask African American women to choose between race and gender as they make political, economic, and social decisions. Race and gender only partly explain African American women's reality. The third burden, the intertwining of African American male and female lives in the context of patriarchy and economic oppression, is an important way of viewing the complexities of the African American woman's existence in these United States. In the context of this patriarchy we are consumers, not producers, of our images in popular culture, the target of a drive-by public policy analysis that asks us to choose between race and gender as we navigate our reality. To invoke the South African proverb, "black women hold up half of the sky" in the African American community. Whether operating from a strong economic base, or from the poverty status that affects more than one in four of us, we shoulder a

third burden as we hold up half the sky. Race, gender, AND society's treatment of African American men shape and define our reality and determine our status. And so, in our oasis, we carve out a research agenda that deals with global studies, entrepreneurship, writing excellence, and innovative research.

We do this work with our history as a backdrop, the backdrop of belle, of Bennett Belle. What does it mean to be a Belle in the 21st century? It means to be distinguished, impactful, focused, and transformative. The Belle once distinguished herself with her hat and gloves worn, once, even brandished, like armor. Hats and gloves meant respectable. Hats and gloves were a way to insist, no, to demand, respect. Hats and gloves on black women in the 20s, 30s, and 40s were a signal to the outside world. "We learned your rules, we played your game, now give me my respect." Hats and gloves here at the Carolina Theatre, where once we had to enter through the side door to a segregated balcony if we wanted to enjoy a movie.

Hats and gloves were a cry, an utterance, and a cleverly disguised revolutionary act. A clarion call in and of themselves. An insistence for equality, for excellence. A way to excite dissatisfaction. They were the educated woman's way of speaking in the words of Sojourner Truth, "Ain't I a woman. I have plowed and planted and not a man could head me and ain't I a woman."

Consider Willa Player. Taking homework to jail the demure, pristine, gloved Willa Player, the gentle manner no mask for her commitment to her college, commitment to our people. Consider Ida B. Wells. Always fighting. Always impeccably attired. Gloves protection. Gloves, part of Paul Dunbar's mask -- "we wear the mask that grins and lies that hides our cheeks and shades our eyes." The mask. The gloves. The bellow. The bell.

It takes no gloved hand to ring the bell today. We don't need hats and gloves as armor. Now we are armed with our intellects, with our educations, with our excellence, our academic achievement, our commitment to no less than the transformation of a society that places a third burden on our shoulders.

Bell. An instrument that produces a ringing sound when struck. My sisters we have been struck. We are struck by economic injustice and by struggles for educational access. Each of you is struck everyday by the inhospitable way in which women, and especially African American women are marginalized by a culture that has reduced us to hip swaying neck-rolling caricatures. Struck by the gratuitous violence that so many of us are subjected to – can somebody say Megan Williams – and the extent to which male leaders turn silently away from this violence. And we respond with a ringing sound. A ringing sound of activism. A clarion call of commitment.

I've been called a firebrand and I claim that. On fire for Bennett. On fire with meaning. On fire with caring. On fire and exciting dissatisfaction. On fire and ferocious enough to make our fire a clarion call for growth, excellence and equality. We Belles, and though I am not an alumna, I am, indeed a Belle, speak out for educational access and affordability. We speak out for social and economic justice. We speak out for the homeless. We speak out for the hungry. We speak out for those who lack health insurance. We speak requiring that our nation become just, that it makes room for us, for our time, talent and achievement.

We speak out, especially, in a global context, where we realize that our sisters around the globe face economic disadvantages that make our challenges look minor.

How do we move from good to great? Exciting dissatisfaction. Answering the clarion call. Excellence and equality. Right here. Right now.