

June 16, 2017

SESP Convocation speaker, undergraduates
Deborah Bial, founder of Posse Foundation

(Convocation co-chairs) Kayla and Emily told me it sometimes feels hard to keep a positive outlook when the world seems to resistant to change.

They wanted to know some kind of words of wisdom on how to keep your resolve, how to remain tough and determined when you feel like you hit walls and challenges all of the time.

I was recently speaking in a room of several hundred people, and I said, ‘can I see a show of hands how many of you – they were from all over the U.S. – have experienced a student protest on your campus within the past year?’ Every hand went up. So it's true.

Students today are speaking up. Making their voices heard, looking for opportunities to address inequities. Wanting to make the world better, right? You want to. That's why you're in this school. But as Kayla and Emily said, students who engage in efforts to speak out are often disparaged. They said the term ‘social justice’ itself is often seen as negative.

The term of ‘social justice worrier’ is used often in a derogatory way and there are those who use the word ‘radical’ to degrade. This worries me. You wanted me to talk about hope. Those of you who are graduating today have chosen an important path in your lives, you have focused on young people and education, social policy, human development; on civic engagement.

Sometimes it feels like the world diminishes the value of educators, and you say no, educators do what is most important. You help people starting with this country's youngest citizens. You help them think. You teach the art of thinking.

Educators help kids develop ideas, and you encourage them to dream. Without you, we all give up. It is this value that you will protect and promote. Thinking and discussion and reasoning allows you and those you teach and serve to be courageous in the face of challenges and crisis, to not give up and we are faced with tremendous challenges.

The long-simmering tensions in America's society have come to a boil. Identity and politics have come to a boil. You know that, don't you?

Women, African-Americans, the LGBTQ community. These groups have come a long way, haven't they? We can say that many of our historically disenfranchised populations have come a long way. We have made progress. We have come a long way. A long way is not enough. It is not all the way.

A few weeks ago, I heard Bill Clinton talk about how much better our decisions are when we make them in diverse teams. But President Clinton went on to make what I think is a most important point. He says we need to expand the definition of 'us' and shrink the definition of 'them.' We need to expand the definition of 'us' and shrink the definition of 'them.' Think about it.

We have too many of them. We are too polarized as a nation. We too often pit one group against another; think about race, class, religion, gender. Think about politics. We too often build groups based on hate. We build systems and institutions that keep them, those others, out. The wall is only one literal example.

We find ways to protect the narrow 'us,' and that's wrong. The result is a set of social and political problems that exacerbate the situations. When we rule by consensus decision making, we rule out smarter decisions and better problem solving because we isolate ourselves without the benefit of diverse teams and problem solving, we make decisions that benefit the few or only slices of our American policy. We leave too many to suffer, and then we look at those who suffer as 'them.'

The problems that affect you and me today are profound. We have terrible tensions between police and community. Two groups that should be united. We have a justice system that works differently for different groups of people based on race and class.

It also seems that those who are most in need are offered the least. And those who have the most are given even more. The patterns of poverty and hardship are obvious.

We have seen them started. First with inequities in child care. We have also failed to take care of the planet and as a result, we have put our children and grandchildren in peril. The image of this country as a dignified land of freedom and inclusion is fraying.

Now (the U.S.) is ridiculed for the posturing and condemned for its ignorance of world issues. Do we want to be part of a more global us or a country that walls ourselves off and alienates others?

We need you. You, who graduate today with this stellar education in your pocket, we need you to stand up, for the things that we have been too slow to address.

You are graduating today with a big choice because you have a SESP degree, your youth and each other, the whole world is open to you. This makes you privileged and it gives you a voice that not everyone has. It gives you power that not everyone has and as you step off this stage, with your degree in your hand, your network around you and you put your foot on the newly-paved street to success, you a big choice.

You can choose to stand by or you can choose to stand up. And I ask that you stand up.

We are in a new and uncertain time. What are your reactions to the new? About threats to national security, about spending cuts that affect healthcare, Social Security and education? What is your reaction when you see journalist intimidated when asking questions. One, as you know, was recently arrested, and just last month, one was assaulted.

What message are we sending if we just stand by? What images to the Muslims, black community, to the women. These are not partisan questions but human questions.

I ask you, will you stand by or stand up? What role will you play to protect the very core of what this country is supposed to stand for? I hope you agree that we must not stand by in the face of threats to the environment and to human rights and to a woman's right to choose.

We must not stand by if we believe that every American citizen has the right to vote without fear of intimidation at the voting booth. Our rights of freedom and speech and access to information and the rights to assemble are precious and we should protect them. We must not stand by. Please, we must not stand by.

We do not want to create a future that we will forget. Women need to stand to have strong personalities and be brilliant and ambitious and still be liked. To be strong and to still be liked. This combination of being strong and liked should not be exclusive to men.

We need to stand for the right to hold public office and change a senate that is today, 80 percent male and 90 percent white, to one that is representative of all genders and all races.

We need to stand against the idea that the wink, nod, or violent comments against women are just locker room banter. Women, still, yes, still, need to stand up for equal pay. We are a civilized society in which the rights of all should be protected by all, by

all of us. And we can't stand by if our rights are threatened by any kind of ignorance, misogyny or bigotry.

The civil rights activist, who walked aside Martin Luther King and John Lewis said “For many of us, the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lifts and walking is not kneeling and yet our legs uttered songs even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.”

I love that!

Be a part of the fight to expand the definition of ‘us.’ Use your voice. Use your legs. March, use your feet. Stand up. Make a statement. We need you to stand. We need you to stand Matt Harris, Molly Clark, Maria, we need you to stand, Greg, Nate, to all of the SESP students. If you have ever stood for a friend or a member of your family, if you have ever stood for something you believe in, even if it was hard, I ask you now to stand. I ask you all to stand.

We are relying on you to be strong, to be deliberate, to be clear thinking and compassionate. We are relying on you to be resilient and brave. We are mothers and fathers and daughters and sons. We are sisters and brothers. We are all civil rights leaders. We are all human rights leaders, look around. As individuals, you are strong. But together you’re an army.