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2017 SESP Convocation speaker, graduate ceremony

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Hello.

I cannot tell you how privileged I feel to be able to share this graduation ceremony with you. Thank you for asking me to be here with another group of students. I might say that I was going to try to 'light the spark' as she said, but knowing SESP the way I do, being a Trustee, I know that what I really will be doing is fanning embers that are already lit, which I hope to do with my thoughts for you.

Kim's summary of who I am tells you who I am today, but I thought it might be relevant to tell you how I got there. When I looked back, I realized that I had never had a chance at not being a change agent. All four of my grandparents are immigrants.

They were aghast when I left my parent's home and was not married. When I was twelve years old, my parents told me I was going to get on a school bus and go to the all-black junior high school to comply with the judge's order to integrate the Virginia public schools. Fifteen percent of the kids got on the bus and 85 percent didn't. It gave me a very important lesson on racial equity at a definitive point in my life in terms of defining what the world looks like.

Flash forward to college and I went to the University of Virginia and co-educated that University, so I got a lesson in gender equality when the national guard showed up to protect the boys from us. I know.

That's when I knew the power of just showing up in a place where you were going to be different. If I was scary just walking into the University, they had no idea what I was capable of.

I had an opportunity to grow up watching democracy in action through the protests around the Civil Rights Act, the protests around the Vietnam war, the protests around women's rights and all of this sounds like Groundhog Day. People actively protested and didn't post anything on Facebook to actually protest. We actually showed up and were involved in actual expression of our views on things.

I've also been the first woman to do everything in my career but not because I woke up and said, 'I need to be the first woman on this executive committee at this law

firm,' but because if I did it, I would break the gender barrier. That's occurred even at Northwestern University in some of the roles I have taken here.

I say that to tell you, we have come a long way, but we have a long way to go. We need people who are willing to think about doing something different. I read the *SESP Inquiry*, the spring 2017 edition, talking about embracing transitions.

Great topic especially for a graduation. On page 7, there's a quote that inspired what I decided to talk about today. And I quote, "transitions are interesting periods because they offer amazing opportunities."

Each of you will step out from here and be able to reinvent yourself. Whoever you walked in as, you get to walk out into wherever you go from here and decide who you're going to be.

I want to encourage you to think about defining who you are by being courageous. And doing something that feels risky. And what will feel risky will change for you over time, especially if you start doing that right off the bat.

I have three ways that I want you to think about being courageous, and I know for those in the audience who are quantitative, it will be very important for you to know when I'm going to be done. So I will very carefully tell you which one I'm on, so you know when we're near the end.

First, I don't want you to feel constrained to do things the way they have always been done. When you walk into whatever organization you're going to walk into, there's always, you know, this is the way we have always done it. When you hear that or feel that's what you're being told, I want you to say 'how could I do it differently and better?'

I want you to look at the status quo as something that clearly can always be improved upon. What does that look like? When I was a lawyer in a law firm, I ran the global environmental group, and I had a small department -- very similar to *SESP* being a small school at a large University --and a billable hour-based business model for those who are going into consulting and are particularly dysfunctional with regard to talent, and talent is the only asset.

And so I decided in my small group, I couldn't change the firm, but in my small group, I could make it a place of psychological safety. What do I mean by that? I could let people be who they are. I could be who I was because I have amazing

strengths but huge deficits. And what I was looking for, were people who could fill the deficits, and I built a very diverse team.

I built the most diverse team however you define it: gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, generation, geography, socioeconomic status. We had the highest professional margin in the whole firm and the highest satisfaction in the whole firm. I realized the only way I could achieve those metrics were with the people.

It's interesting now because I did not have a business degree. I had a law degree and lawyers actually are incentivized to not be good business people, so I was testing business concepts without having any support for it.

Google just did a big survey. They were looking for what the most productive teams were. Their hypothesis was, if they took their highest performers, and they put them all on the same team, then that would be the team that would outperform. Does anybody think that will work?

I see a lot of heads nodding. You're right. Those teams were the biggest disasters because you had all of the primadonnas fighting for air time and everybody wanted to be the leader. No one wanted to be the follower, it was a total disaster. The highest performing teams were the teams where the teams that had the highest psychological safety, which is their ability to be the most authentic self. That's a way to change up whatever is the way that it is normally done.

Second, Shel Silverstein who is one of my favorite poets, if you allow me to give him that much credit. In his poem, Melinda May, he illustrates the saying, 'if you're going to eat a whale, you start one bite at a time.'

Some of you will walk into an organization, and it is so dysfunctional that it's hard to even think about where you will start. I don't want you to vote with your feet without trying to fix it, because if we have all of these dysfunctional organizations out there with nobody staying and trying to fix them, then we never get better.

What does this look like? Again, I will illustrate with a story because I think that sticks with you more than my words. I was the first woman on the executive committee at Winston and Strawn. There have been these articles in the paper recently about men interrupting women in meetings and how it robs power from women. In those days, there wasn't as much interruption.

They didn't know what to do because I was the first woman who was sitting in the room. I would talk. Everybody would be quiet, and then they would go on as if I did

not say anything. And then about ten minutes later, some guy would say exactly what I said and say it was a great idea and they wouldn't even remember that I had opened my mouth.

I didn't know how to respond to that. I had no allies in the room so I started figuring out how I could play the game on their terms until I could change the rules by earning enough standing.

I did a number of things, but two things work particularly well for me. The first thing is that I realized that when they were talking about who their connections were in the community or the clients or the CEOs or the general counsels, they all knew the exact same people because they were all straight white men of the same age.

And I brought a network that was so entirely different from theirs. As the world began to change, not everybody in power looked like them. They started to look like me and other people. That gave me a power base because there were seven people who said, 'oh, I know Joe' but I was the only person who said, 'oh, I know Mary.'

The second thing I did was realize that information was power. They hoarded information because that made them powerful. What I did was I gave out information.

Most of the information wasn't protected by fiduciary duty, and in doing that, I created a base of loyalty that so far exceeded them that when it came to a vote of the firm partners. They mustered the same people, and I had everybody else. So that gave me a power base where when I got the second woman on the competitive committee and the first African-American on the committee, we had the ability to actually have a voice.

The third thing I would like you to think about is something I'm borrowing from our Homeland Security. When you see something, say something. I don't mean, you know, an abandoned bag around campus.

What I'm talking about is when you're in the workplace and you hear something or you see something that's not right, do something about it. One of the biggest issues in organizations today is that a lot of good people are doing nothing. People think that the remark was okay and the culture devolves to that new lowest common denominator, and everybody suffers because of that.

There are ways to think about this. For example, how many of you use Uber today? Raise your hands. I don't use Uber and I know their app is superior to Lift and their GPS is superior and they have more drivers. But since February when Susan Fallers'

remarks came out about the sexual harassment within the organization, I'm not going to support that kind of an organization. I may not be on the board to hire a special investigation and I may not be able to put the CEO on leave, but I certainly don't have to give them revenue. That's a way I can act. I'm not a tweeter or a blogger, and I know you are all probably professionals at that, but there's a way to decide how even my 401K is going to be spent and what type of organization it's going to support. That's a way to walk my values. I can do it every day. The biggest risk is that it's going to take me two more minutes to get a Lyft than it would to get an Uber.

I will give you two more examples. One is an old example. I first got on Winston's executive committee in 1992, the first slate of equity partners in the law firm. An equity partner is an owner and that's as high as you can get in a law firm. The first slate of equity partners that they put up for approval by the executive committee was all straight, white men.

Nobody talked to me because I haven't anything to trade, or so they thought. What I decided to do, and of course, I hadn't seen it before because there's the dealing up until the time we walked in the room. I looked at the slate and looked at the secretary in the meeting, and said, 'I want you to put this in the minutes. I'm going to vote against every single one of these people on the basis that this slate cannot possibly be our best group of people. They cannot possibly, at this point in time, be only straight, white and male.'

They of course, gave me the -- and I have heard it so many times in my life, I can't tell you -- 'Oh, Jane, we were hoping that you were going to be reasonable' and it's like, no, I'm not going to. I want that in the minutes, that that's why I'm voting against them.

What ended up happening is they pulled the slate and they came back with a slate at our next meeting and it was diverse. Surprise, surprise. Some of those guys didn't deserve to be equity partners, and there were people who did deserve to be equity partners that were not on the original slate. I never had to do that again. Never had to have that conversation again.

Another example, and this is one from two months ago. So from 1992, flash forward to 2017. We did a request for proposal for a new legal counsel. We had three people who made the short list. We interviewed all three, and I was sitting with my fellow directors, and I'm the only woman, the first woman and the only woman on that board.

I was the only one to notice that two out of three of the teams were only white men. In 2017.

When I said that, and the way I said it was, 'well, they can't be giving us their best people because the best and the brightest don't look like this today. It's not what in our country looks like.' The fact that they didn't even notice that was very disturbing, so there's a lot of room for growth, and there's a lot of space for you all to go out there and change the world, make it into a better place. Make it into a place where everybody has access to the ability to succeed, however they're going to find that.

I congratulate each and every one of you graduates, and I congratulate your families on your success today. I leave you with two words: Be courageous!