

## Presidential Address to the Class of 2013

Prepared Remarks of President William L. Pollard - Wednesday, September 16, 2009

**One's struggle is individual, but it is not unique. All of life is involved, struggle is an escapable aspect of life itself. – Howard Thurman**

Greetings Freshman Class. For the past few weeks, I have walked through the corridors and classrooms of the Bedford, Carroll St. and "S" buildings, and seen your faces. I've had a chance to speak to some of you. But for those of you who are meeting me for the first time let me give you a little bit of background on who I am and what I stand for. I am William Lawrence Pollard - the son of Bette and Linwood Pollard. My mother was a domestic worker and my father was a laborer who, like many Americans today, at times knew the hardship of unemployment. They raised my seven siblings and me in a public housing project in Raleigh, North Carolina. I attended a small church in the neighborhood and was educated in the public schools.

I got my first job when I was 12 years old and have been working ever since. Sometimes the work was hard-going, in the sun, harvesting tobacco on my uncles' farms in eastern North Carolina. Sometimes the work was rather easy like my job shelving books at the Olivia Rainey Library in Raleigh. On other occasions the work was neither hard nor easy, but somewhat demeaning. I once worked in a segregated hamburger drive-in that was a hangout for white teens. I can still vividly recall being the one elected one evening to tell a driver that he and his family that could not eat there because the place did not serve black people. These experiences – work, family, spiritual life – forged the man who stands before you today. I became a person who values history and the past. I know about hard work and sacrifice; study and effort. I believe in diversity and acceptance of differences. I also value faith in the possible, and wisdom. Perhaps more important than anything else, I learned that the world can change if people work hard at it and that no matter where you grow up, regardless of your racial, family and community circumstances, you can overcome seemingly insurmountable odds.

Much has changed since I was a young man growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina. The differences in our ages are not just chronological, they are experiential. The times shaped me just as they shall shape you, but there are a few differences in the times that produced me and you. You, my young friends are being shaped by a time that gave this nation its first president of African descent. This is the same nation that framed my childhood with memories of being forced to drink from water fountains that were designated for colored people only. You are being shaped by a time where there is a female secretary of state. I was shaped by a mother who was born in 1919 - the year before women got the hard-won right to vote.

Much has changed but the lessons learned from my parents still hold true. They were poor but both were strivers who read a lot and raised their children to reach for the stars. They taught us that there are no free lunches. So everything I have in life I have worked hard to get; yet I

recognize I did not come this far on my own. My being here as president is all about a village that reared me, nurtured me, and refused to allow me to succumb to the temptations of the streets. I received some tough love mixed with the encouragement that pushed me to reach far beyond the goals and dreams I had for myself. I had mentors, teachers, parents, church folk, and friends that supported me, and my role here in this presidency is to support you. I am not alone in this.

There are Medgar Evers professors and staff members like Dr. Ed Catapane, a physiologist and Professor of Biology, who involves Medgar students in many of his research projects. He has testified before the United States Congress on the value of the Biomedical Research Support Program for underserved minority students. Another example includes Freshman Year Program advisors Charles L. Jones and Lystra Huggins-Anderson who teach gender-specific seminars that provide young men and women like yourselves with college success strategies like time management and text taking tips. Some professors, like Guggenheim-award winning playwright Thomas Bradshaw - whose play *The Bereaved* received raves in *The New York Times* - will show you the meaning of success by example.

The entire Medgar Evers family is here to support you. Helping you to realize your dreams and aspirations is the primary reason we are here. Without you, there would be no “us.” We work for you. That is why it is my resolve to make Medgar Evers College the most student-centered campus in CUNY and beyond. Let me say this again for this statement reflects my vision for Medgar Evers College. I want Medgar to be recognized as the leading student-centered college in CUNY and beyond. On Monday, September 14, 2009, I challenged the faculty and staff to create a new compact with students. A compact that reflects the great respect we have for you for making Medgar Evers College your school of choice.

I know you are still adjusting, still trying to navigate the campus, to figure out your course loads and make new friends. You all have some major life choices ahead of you and we have a Freshman Year Program here at Medgar that is designed to help you make the transition to college. We are going to enhance existing structures to further ensure you make it to your sophomore year. We will encourage faculty student interactions outside of the classroom, where you can bond with professors in small group settings. We are taking several steps to become more student-centered.

Recently, a young woman shared with me how she stumbled in her academic journey because someone in the Medgar family spoke a little too roughly, a little too strongly and stamped down her spirit for education. She subsequently left the College but now she is back. While I am president, I will encourage a culture where faculty and staff work together to make students always feel welcome. This means from the first moment students call to ask about enrollment, or walk-in with concerns on how to pay for school - whatever the interaction - it will be a positive one. When students leave us after a class or a counseling session or even after receiving a low grade on an exam, I want you to leave us believing that to us, you are the most important people in the world.

Medgar will have a new, holistic approach to student support that moves beyond the classroom. Faculty doors will be open to you when you are seeking counsel on work, school or any other life issue which impacts your ability to excel. My own doors will be open to students for drop in hours twice a week: Fridays from 1 to 4 pm for day students and Tuesdays from 5 to 8 pm for evening students. The times agreed on have been determined in consultation with the Student Government Association president with whom I had several informative meetings. The time is yours so come by for a visit. Let me know who you are, what you are doing, what inspires you and what we can do to enable you.

We are here to provide you with a foundation but ultimately all of you must take personal responsibility for your own destiny. You have to take the wheel and assume greater control for what happens to you here at Medgar and anywhere else you may go in the world. Don't let anyone turn you around or keep you from reaching your goals. As a man who grew up and matured in the sixties and early seventies, and as one who lived in a period that witnessed the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers and three civil rights workers in Mississippi who were just trying to register people to vote, I believe that I have the responsibility to tell you that you have no right to give up because someone was rude or a class room is not as clean as you would want it to be. My young friends before someone was rude to you, someone died for you. The deaths of King, Evers and others are a testimony of what real rudeness is.

Yes, you will have challenges. I worked very hard and often had to experience failure before I could grasp the lessons I needed to learn; so don't give up at the first time the going gets tough. Maybe you are a single parent struggling to juggle childcare and term papers, but you are not alone. Jerib Carson is the single father of a six year old daughter, Sarah. After three years, he graduated this June with a dual B.A. degree in general childhood and special education and is now working toward his Master of Arts in Teaching at Tufts University's Graduate School of Education on a full tuition scholarship. After completing his graduate work, he plans to return to New York to begin a Doctoral degree at Teachers College, Columbia University, where he has already been accepted in Instructional Technology and Media. So I tell you others have faced this, and many others challenges and excelled. You can to.

In his poem "Mother to Son" Langston Hughes wrote the weary words of a mother to her son who said: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." She described steps with tacks and boards torn up yet despite her weariness she kept climbing. You are going to be tired. You cannot afford to sit down and give up.

Each of you must hone your intellect, develop your talents, and study relentlessly. You cannot let other people determine who you will or won't be. Do not have a grasshopper complex. The manner in which you think of yourselves is how the world will regard you. Let me share a story with you.

<sup>30</sup>Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses, and said, "Let us go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it." <sup>31</sup> But the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people, for they *are* stronger than we." <sup>32</sup> And they gave the children of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, "The land through which we have gone as spies *is* a land that devours its inhabitants, and all the people whom we saw in it *are* men of *great* stature. <sup>33</sup> There we saw the giants; and we were like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight." Numbers 13:30-33 NKJV

In this passage the children of Israel were searching for the Promised Land. They sent scouts ahead who saw a land of plenty yet were paralyzed with self doubt and unable to move forward. They focused on what they perceived to be as "giants"; making ordinary men like themselves into obstacles that kept them from their good fortune. They lost faith in themselves. They felt diminished and as small as grass hoppers. Because they felt small they became small. I want you all to think big and feel even bigger. You are what you think you are. I want each of you to think of yourselves as scholars, think of yourselves as budding authors, as nurses, as physicians and lawyers. Think of yourselves as presidents and senators and more than anything else know that whatever you think you are, you can be.

In his autobiography *Up From Slavery*, the great educator Booker T. Washington tells the story of the call for donations to build the Tuskegee Institute. Often people gave whatever they could afford. Contributions were anything from a quilt to stalks of sugarcane. Washington writes of his encounter with an old woman – about seventy years of age - who hobbled over to him on her cane. She was dressed in rags, he underscored that her rags were clean, and had spent most of her life enslaved. Yet even in her poverty, with no money, no schooling- she realized the value of education to better her race. She gave what little she had - six eggs - to the cause. It is a personal tradition of mine to give six eggs whenever I give a speech of importance. On the advice of one of your classmates, I am giving you a full dozen.

- 1- **Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek. - Barack Obama - *I present to you the egg for "change."***
- 2- **Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships. - Michael Jordan - *I present to you the egg for "teamwork."***
- 3- **You cannot escape the responsibility of tomorrow by evading it today. - Abraham Lincoln - *I present to you the egg for "responsibility."***
- 4- **Success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed. - Booker T. Washington - *I present to you the egg for "initiative."***

- 5- Leadership cannot just go along to get along. Leadership must meet the moral challenge of the day. - Jesse Jackson - *I present to you the egg for "leadership."*
- 6- If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare composed poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, "Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well." - Martin Luther King, Jr. *I present to you the egg for "pride."*
- 7- You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them. - Desmond Tutu - *I present to you the egg for "family."*
- 8- It isn't until you come to a spiritual understanding of who you are - not necessarily a religious feeling, but deep down, the spirit within - that you can begin to take control. - Oprah Winfrey - *I present to you the egg for "faith."*
- 9- I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke in me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. - Malcolm X - *I present to you the egg for "literacy."*
- 10- Hold a true friend with both your hands. - Nigerian Proverb - *I present to you the egg for "friendship."*
- 11- I made a commitment to completely cut out drinking and anything that might hamper me from getting my mind and body together. And the floodgates of goodness have opened upon me - spiritually and financially. - Denzel Washington - *I present to you the egg for "health."*
- 12- Mary McLeod Bethune once wrote about the establishment of Bethune-Cookman College. She said: ***"I once stood on a garbage heap and imagined that there was a college."*** This visionary woman saw beyond the garbage dump that no one else wanted and envisioned a place where black boys and girls could gain an education. ***And finally I present the egg of "vision."***

You too have visions, and with these eggs you can begin the work of creating a better life for yourselves and your families. These eggs are symbols of the great faith I have in you.

Remember that we are all here to make your dreams of success a reality. Study hard. Work hard. We all will be working hard for you.