

To God – the master planner who knew of this moment well before I wrote my college essay about founding a private boarding school for urban children to address the injustice of the public schools.

To my parents – Paul and Maxine Adkins - who provided me with unconditional, tough love, support, and discipline.

To my family – sisters, brothers, aunt, uncle, cousin, nieces, nephews, and the new family I am joining – The Graves

To John Egan, President of the Board of City Trusts; Bernard Smalley, Chair of the Girard College Committee of the Board of City Trusts; Peter Shoemaker, Chairman of the Board of Managers; Soledad O'Brien, our keynote speaker; Other participants in today's service; Members of the Board of City Trust and Board of Managers; Mayor Nutter and other public servants who have gathered.

To my friends, especially those who saw strength within me when I was weak with doubt; the Freedom Fighters, family of Cecil B. Moore, and other people who fought so that someone like me can be president; the Girard College Alumni; past Girard College presidents Joseph Devlin and Dominic Cermelli; the Faculty and Staff of Girard College; Members of the Academic Community; Friends of Girard College

To the student body, especially the senior class who sent me flowers for today; Saints and Sinners - Good Afternoon!

I am truly humbled and honored to stand before all of you who are assembled and accept the responsibilities and authority associated with being the 16<sup>th</sup> president of Girard College.

As I was writing this speech, I had several failed attempts. I was trying to write something that directly connected to the poem we heard today – Still I Rise. I was trying to artfully weave my appreciation for the many people who fought for me – a black female to be able to be president of this storied institution. I was going to focus on the historic nature of my appointment and all of the many people who gave of their life to the racial and gender integration of Girard. And while I am so grateful for their sacrifices, I didn't feel a speech with this, as a focus would come from my authentic self.

Instead, I am going to spend a few minutes reflecting on my personal past and then I will move to the most important part of my talk – The future of Girard College.

This mantle of leadership is heavy, but I know that I have been prepared to lead Girard College into the school's best days. I have spent years preparing for this moment.

I struggled with the complexities of United States history at the University of Virginia. I have studied leadership and management in the classrooms of Columbia University and New York University.

I have honed my craft as a teacher, turned my passion for teaching social justice into the development of community service and service learning programs in several schools; engaged a variety of constituencies to join together to lead and manage several private schools;

I have been mentored and encouraged by some of the best independent school headmasters in the country – Walter Burgin, Sam Salas, Bruce Stewart, Lisa Darling, Dorothy Hutchinson, and Julia Williams, to name a few.

I have also been a student of some remarkable teachers: Richard Truscott, my 10<sup>th</sup> grade Chemistry Teacher; Julian Bond, my undergraduate thesis advisor; Pearl Kane my graduate school advisor; and the most important teacher I have had to date – Sister Frances Hurley – my first grade teacher.

Perhaps the most important preparation I have had for becoming the President of Girard College has come from the lessons my students have taught me. Over the years, I have taught and advised several thousand students. During these years, I have learned about struggle, tenacity, integrity, overcoming emotional and physical challenges, the love of learning, the joy of achievement, the pain of defeat, what true resilience is, and how you can demonstrate unconditional love.

It is these experiences and lessons that I will use to lead Girard College through this next phase of its history. It is also these moments that I have used to shape my vision for this prestigious academic institution.

There are six parts to my vision for Girard.

1. We will become the *premier institution for effective urban education*.

Since I was 17 years old, I have struggled with the inequities in the educational system today. As an adult, I have heard political conservatives and liberals and teachers from both sides of the aisle claim that you just cannot expect that much from inner-city children.

I have heard well meaning people talk about financially impoverished children as people who need to be coddled, because life has been so hard for them, that you just cannot let them experience true challenge anymore.

Too often adults use a child's physical, social or emotional circumstance as a cover or excuse for the adults' poor performance or lack of true professional commitment to children.

I stand before the children and parents of Girard College and make a pledge: You have my word that I, Autumn J. Adkins, will work with a passion, love, and intensity to level the playing field and provide each of you with a true 21<sup>st</sup> Century education that will prepare you not only for advanced education, military or public service, or the work force, but teach you how to be civic leaders in this global society.

I will surround myself with innovative thinkers, courageous educators, and sophisticated problem solvers to develop a comprehensive curricular and co-curricular program that teaches problem solving, critical thinking, coherent expression, integrity, compassion, responsibility, technical skills, physical and emotional wellness, the creative arts, and spiritual development.

We will set the bar very high for our students and I will do my personal best to make sure our students have the resources needed to reach those standards.

From my reading of Stephen Girard's will, I deeply believe he did not want the students of his school to have a good education. He wanted them to have an excellent academic and life experience within these walls to prepare them to be leaders outside of these walls.

I hope and pray that the adults involved – teachers, residential advisors, housekeepers, grounds keepers, engineers, maintenance crew members, laundresses, security officers, seamstresses, administrators, secretaries, nurses, cooks, dishwashers, technicians, board members, organized labor representatives, and politicians will put the needs of our students before their own desires.

We need to make sure that Girard College is a school where children come first.

2. We must raise the *profile of Stephen Girard* in this city and this nation.

He was a remarkable man – merchant, banker, political activist, public health and mental health advocate, and social entrepreneur. We must study Girard and share his story with the thousands of philanthropist and entrepreneurs who populate this land.

3. Sometimes we only focus on creating new programs and ideas and loose site of those that have been historically successful. When I talk with alumni there are several consistent components to their Girard experience that they point to when defining their success outside of these walls.
  - a. The Seven Day Boarding Program
  - b. Family style dining and consistent etiquette lessons – otherwise known as good home training.
  - c. Experiential Education
  - d. Growing up on this campus together for many years

- e. Being taught self-discipline and self-reliance

I am convinced that we must *explore some of the past practices, update them for a 21<sup>st</sup> century education and implement them into our current program.*

- 4. The father of this great institution was a pioneer in developing sophisticated financial plans. Because of his cutting edge thinking, Girard amassed a great fortune that has benefitted thousands of children and their families, and many citizens of Philadelphia and eastern Pennsylvania.

Now it is time more than ever, for Girard College to *engage in an intense financial and facilities capital strategic plan.*

We must think differently about our educational model to make it one that is financially sustainable while providing 21<sup>st</sup> century facilities and supporting an excellent faculty and staff. This type of planning will involve a number of people who will have to think deeply and make difficult decisions. We no longer have the luxury to just keep doing what we have always done when it comes to budgeting.

Instead, we must change our conceptualization of how we support our programs. This type of planning is not glamorous and will be painful. But it is the only way we can appropriately steward Stephen Girard's financial legacy.

- 5. Once we complete this extensive deferred maintenance and financial strategic plan, there will be one outcome of which I know – there will not be enough money from the Girard Estate to finance all that we determine is crucial to providing an excellent program to our students and maintaining this incredible campus.

We must *build a culture of philanthropy* within our alumni base and design a robust fundraising program that will provide millions of dollars on an annual basis to supplement our endowment. Throughout my tenure as president, you will hear me talk more and more about the philanthropic responsibility every Philadelphian and alumni has for Girard.

- 6. Lastly, I plan to build a comprehensive alumni support program. This “*Office of Alumni Support*” will be a professionally staffed office with the sole purpose to provide academic, financial, career, and life skills guidance to our graduates in the first six years of living outside of these walls.

Too many of our graduates leave the cocoon of our school and do not have the self-advocacy skills to maneuver the complexities of adulthood. We must provide this type of consistent support in an effort to cultivate the investment Stephen Girard's legacy makes in each child who lives and learns within these walls.

Some would say this six-part vision plan is too ambitious and will cause a chaotic breakdown of our institution.

Some would say that I am too focused on holding adults accountable and pushing students to stretch to be their personal best.

And then there are those who are my critics and strongly believe that I won't be able to accomplish much because of my age, gender, race, and non-Philadelphia native status.

I know that some or all of these characteristics could serve as impediments. I also know each of these factors create the base of strength that has led to my success.

You see - I am only willing to be the president of Girard College because I know I have some gifts and talents that can be of assistance to this school as I embark on realizing this vision.

I also know that I cannot do this work alone. We have all heard that it takes a village to raise a child. Well, it will take the alumni, the collegiate academic community, private and public schools, every employee, and the city of Philadelphia – each constituency must decide to put children first and measure every decision by honestly assessing if it will benefit children.

Every adult owes every student the right to an excellent education. Education is this generation's civil right.

We know that education is the key to eliminating poverty and reducing the long-term effects of many social and physical diseases.

Will you help?

Over the upcoming months and years, you will be asked to invest in our students using your time, talent, and treasures. I hope that each of you will decide to support not just Stephen Girard's legacy or my being the new president. I hope that you will make a commitment to our students to push other school leaders, teachers, and me to provide the best life and academic education that can be obtained - in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the foundation of Stephen Girard's intentions.

Thank you for what many of you have already done for Girard College. And, I thank you for what you will do for my new family – the children of Girard!

Hail Girard!