TSU 100-YEAR ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

SPEECH FOR

CATANA STARKS

Hello everyone! I would like to let you all know that it is a thrill, a pleasure and an honor to share in this celebration today. I would like to express special thanks to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, the President of the TSU Atlanta Alumni Association and to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, the Interim President of TSU for allowing me the privilege of speaking to all of you. Today we celebrate the power of education and the endurance, resilience and contributions made by our affiliation with this wonderful school. For 100 years, Tennessee State University has been an integral part of the promotion of our education and achievements and its enduring and sustained legacy is a source of great pride for all of us. For the past 100 years, TSU has been a snug harbor and an intellectual home for African Americans and others from every walk of life. It’s been a place that we know served our community wisely and well and provided us with the opportunity to learn the lessons and hone the skills required to be able to sustain oneself in the contemporary world. This University has maintained itself through good times and bad; through war and peace; through feast and famine and has been an admirable context for the pursuit of higher education for all of us. I’d like to share my story with you and hopefully you will all see, as my family before me saw, the importance of education, mentorship and encouragement in living an accomplished, challenging, and fulfilling life. I also want to acknowledge the contribution that being involved with TSU has made in my life, first as a student, then as a professor and department head, and always as a proud alumna. I know my life would not have been as fulfilled and enriched were it not for my participation in the activities and premier education offered by the programs of this great school. I am proud to be a part of its history and legacy.

I would like to share a quote by one our finest graduates, Oprah Winfrey, who said “Martin Luther King, Jr. and everything that he represented, all the people whose names never made the history books, made it possible for me to stand and be who I am and take over ownership of my life.” I believe in those words and I couldn’t have done better myself if not for vision of my family and the education that I received from Tennessee State University.

I was born and grew up in the segregated South in Mobile, Alabama, but I was blessed to have the 2 most important women in my life, my mother and my grandmother, dare to have a vision for a future that offered more than history had provided for them. My grandmother only had a fourth grade education, but clearly understood that it was essential that my mother and uncle had to be educated. Although my uncle attended trade school, my mother chose to go to Tennessee A&I College. She was advised by her father that, if she wanted, she could attend a different school each year, and so she chose to attend Tuskegee the next year and Alabama State the year after that. Talk about a well-rounded education! My mother had the foresight to explore as much as she was able to do. She chose to indulge her curiosity and experience education from different angles. My mother earned her degree as a teacher and my family’s legacy of honoring the power of education continued, as she became a caring, compassionate educator who won many accolades from her colleagues and acknowledgement from her students. I remember as a child hearing the stories of the students who struggled. They had difficulty learning, but my mother somehow found ways to encourage them and keep them engaged. I recall she would lead sessions for the children in exercise and games and I remember the end of school year events planned around those “May pole activities.” As I think back on those times, isn’t it interesting how I, too, was influenced and inspired by the sense of community and group achievement that can be discovered in seemingly simple group schoolyard activities. Also as I grew up, I remember that since my mother was a firm believer in the power of learning and the possession of knowledge, my sister and I were given reading assignments and other learning exercises, even during the summer months. The thought of being idle or the concept of just hanging out didn’t exist in our household. We knew we had real “**home**work” assignments to complete before we could leave the house to go out and play.

Picture this…so here I am, in the middle of the segregated South, growing up in Mobile, Alabama, and somehow, some way, I am blessed to be born into a family that has an amazing respect and diligent discipline with regard to being a well rounded, educated, compassionate and confident human being. We all face challenges in life, but I had some others as well. On top of the educational regimen that guided me, I had a rough time due to some health issues I was also facing. As I child growing up, I had to learn to deal with having asthma. There was very little known at the time about treatment, and the doctors told my family that my physical activities would have to be seriously restricted. As you might have already guessed, the members of my family were “independent thinkers” and they just didn’t listen to the doctors. My mother seems to have had an almost mystical belief in not being limited by circumstances, and so I reaped the benefits and continued to live an active extracurricular life-after the homework was done to satisfaction. One major activity that encompassed many hours was learning to swim. Yes, I chose to learn to swim-even with my asthma. Doctors will tell you that there are both benefits and issues with regard to having asthmatics swim, but remember the family I come from. We focus on the positive. We are not limited by circumstances. We choose to overcome obstacles. Another thing to keep in mind is that in order to be able to get those swimming lessons, I had to walk 3 miles each way to the only Black swimming pool in the city! Yes… walking 6 miles back and forth for a lesson, swimming like my life depended on it-and it did…WHO HAD TIME FOR ASTHMA?!?! (**Say this with a little exaggeration and wait for the laugh**). I am proud of those days and that discipline. I learned to swim, I eventually became a certified lifeguard, and I later realized how important this phase of my life was to become. The ability to swim played a huge role in all of the success I have achieved in my life. I learned the power of resilience, positive thinking and determination, all essential characteristics that served me well later on.

As was the case in my mother’s youth, both my sister and I were encouraged to go to college. My sister chose to attend Tuskegee College and I selected Tennessee A&I. During my college years, I learned that the American Red Cross sponsored a program called, “Friendship to Africa.” With the upbringing I had and the spirit of infinite possibility instilled in me from my mother and grandmother, I took a chance. Even though 500 people applied for the program, and knowing only 10 were to be selected, I was thrilled to learn that I would be one of those 10 lucky people. I was working on my Master’s degree at the time and I had the honor of being selected to represent the entire Southeastern region of the U.S. Although 6 of the candidates were assigned to Malawi, I was sent to Liberia with the 3 other students and also had the distinction of being placed in charge of my division. We spent the summer teaching a variety of Red Cross courses. It was an incredible experience. Not only did I get to travel and visit the Liberian President’s Mansion, I began to have the chance to really interact with and teach people. I got the opportunity to begin to teach, inspire and mentor people as a tribute to those who taught and inspired me. That was a thrilling time for me. I learned so much about travel, civilization, African culture and life itself. I remember that we had the privilege of visiting the President’s mansion, and there was an exhibition of pictures of free slaves who had been allowed to return to Africa. Seeing that exhibition was truly a gift and taught me a lot about the history, struggles and fortitude of the African people. A further gift of a lifetime thanks to this project with the Red Cross was that I was given the opportunity to travel with my group from Africa to Geneva, Switzerland, where I was invited to present a report of our experiences in Africa to the Red Cross Society. While there, we had the chance to indulge our sporting side and spent a few days mountain climbing and hiking. Imagine **ME**-Catana Starks-mountain climbing in Switzerland! It was a long way from Mobile, Alabama, and I learned to savor and cherish each step I was taking on my life’s journey.

Upon my return to complete my Master’s degree in physical education, a recruiter came to college from Saginaw, Michigan looking for an African American who could teach physical education and had Water Safety Instructors’ Certification. They needed someone who could coach both Boys and Girls swim teams. Although I had never swum in competition in my life, I knew of the challenges life threw at me and I knew how I navigated **THOSE** rough waters. I believed in myself, the education I had received so far, and the strength and resilience of the human spirit. I knew I could make a contribution in mentoring and coaching those students. I knew deep down inside me that I had what was needed to handle responsive changing conditions and I knew that **every challenge creates an opportunity.** Thiswas another golden opportunity that was presented to me thanks to my affiliation with TSU.I was eventually hired after my second interview and off to Saginaw, Michigan I went. I am gratified to say that I was able to build a successful program that produced a diver who earned the opportunity to compete in the state championships.

In my 2nd year in Saginaw, I was named the department chair and was given other coaching duties. I am proud of the achievements of the athletes I mentored and coached in Michigan, and was confident sharing the educational and motivational tools I learned at TSU. I became head coach for women’s basketball and that team made it into the state championships. Many players that I was fortunate enough to coach earned scholarships and one played for TSU. One of my players even earned a full scholarship to play for Michigan State and was named an “All American.” There is much to be said for the power of education, mentorship and positive thinking and the success of my students is a humbling testimony.

Along the way, I filled in for other coaches as needed. I remember one time, when the Junior Varsity baseball coach, who taught at another school, could not be present at an event; I was assigned to coach his team. On my watch, the team never lost a game. I called squeeze plays, steals, everything imaginable, and would you believe, I could never even get a handshake from an opposing coach. With it all, I stayed positive and focused on mentoring the students. I also served as coach of the Men’s Basketball team. We reached the state championships and had to play the team that featured Magic Johnson. Although we lost that game, we held Magic to only 12 little points. I additionally coached and played fast pitch softball. Apparently destiny had other plans for me, because during one game, as I slid into 3rd base and broke my ankle in 2 places, one of my colleagues suggested that perhaps I might try a sport that wouldn’t present the chance for me to “kill myself.” When I asked what sport he had in mind, he suggested golf. This, pardon the pun, became a “game changer” in my career as a coach and served to really alter my destiny.

In 1980, I returned to TSU to teach swimming in the Physical Education department. I subsequently went on to coach the men’s swim team, where we swam in competitive events against able teams from Vanderbilt, the University of the South, Florida A&M, Emory, to name a few. There were not many swim teams in the south, but we all made the best of what we had. Many of those swimmers we competed with and against went on to be very successful in their chosen careers, and I am sure it is in no small part thanks to the disciplined and nurturing environment in which they learned to swim and compete.

Eventually, since he knew I played golf, I was asked by the athletic director to start a men’s golf team. Given my “legendary” optimism and my passion for a challenge, I agreed. Talk about challenges! I later discovered that I was the first woman to be Head Coach of a Division 1 Men’s golf team; we had no 18-hole golf course at which to practice-a 9-hole Ted Rhodes course was the best we could do, we had inferior equipment, and, one other thing. I learned no one was really that interested in the program-it had been set up to meet the requirements of the NCAA. I had to go out and **CREATE** the **MAGIC**. I summoned up all my reserves. I was determined to **NOT** take the easy way out. I focused on building a successful program and worked hard to locate talented and committed golfers, but first I knew I had to convince the professionals at local golf courses. My efforts enabled us to have access to the Springhouse GC, Hermitage GC, and Legend GC, all of who made genuine and valuable contributions to the TSU golf program. We found golfers with potential; many of them were international students.

My golfers-actually all of my athletes, are a constant source of inspiration and motivation to me. They learned, they played; they went on to motivate and mentor others. I was proud to have received a call from the Golf Professional at the Governor’s club, extending an invitation to my team to play and practice. He told me he remembered when he played golf at Memphis State and also said he was impressed with our accomplishments. What an honor it was to receive an invitation and such recognition to play on such an outstanding course! Our team received other accolades as well. Distinguished members include Sam Puryear, who was head of the first team program in Atlanta. Sam went on to join Stanford University as assistant coach and helped them win an NCAA championship; he later became head coach at Michigan State and subsequently held the same position in North Carolina. Nyre Williams is presently the director of the Atlanta program and is doing a great job. These fine young men took what they learned and honored their legacies as they went on to do the best they could by mentoring and coaching the next generation. Two of my earliest international recruits were Adrian Adams and Sean Foley, both from Canada. Although Adrian started to play on tour, he later chose to focus on his insurance career; he has taken the discipline and teamwork he learned and has built a successful business. Sean Foley is currently Tiger Woods’ swing coach. Robert Dinwiddie is presently on the European Tour. When he was a member of the team that won the National Minority Golf Championship, his was the lowest score, and we all know in golf, that’s the goal! Robert also represented the team on the NCAA Regional Championship held on the Yale University Golf Course and became our university’s first All American golfer. His skills and abilities have earned him the right to play in the US Open and we are indeed, very proud of Robert!

Although this may seem like it’s “all about me,” I have to say that I’d like to clarify that. I am telling you about my experiences to show you how important education, mentorship and TSU have been in my life and the lives of my family. Some people may think of getting a college education is just a “thing” they have to do, but I am telling you, as you can see from the experiences of my family and the challenges and triumphs I have experienced so far in my life, that having the **privilege** to **earn** an education is life changing. Having the honor and opportunity to mentor, teach and coach others is a gift and a privilege that goes beyond gratitude. I had the blessings of humble beginnings, determined family members and the DNA that gives me the thirst for education and the determination to make the best of a situation. All that I have is possible because of education, and I have dedicated my life to sharing my passion with others with the hope and intention that they too, will go on to teach, coach and inspire others.

I expect from others what I demand of myself. I was raised in an environment that had little tolerance for limitations. I was raised to have a dream and to go for it. I was raised to believe strongly in the power of education and I was raised to share my legacy. It has been a gift to be able to contribute to the lives and successes of my students and athletes. I have always demanded of them what I have required of myself, and that is that I expect hard work, dedication and excellence. I have always given 110% and I expect that from those around me. I am proud to say that the golf program was presented with the Academic Achievement Award for the highest grade point average of any golf program in the Ohio Valley. Our athletes and team members of the golf program have gone on to realize their potential in their chosen careers and the program has produced many successful professionals in law and other essential businesses and services. Every athlete I worked with was required to set goals and make the extra effort to attain them. Some succeeded more thank others but the point is that everyone did his or her best, and most importantly, they were engaged in the process of learning about themselves and life. We all have heard that it’s not whether one wins or loses, but how one plays the game. Of course winning feels a lot better than losing, but each experience provides priceless lessons. I think that we can all believe the value of being involved in sports with regard to enhancing one’s formal education is best stated in the Chinese proverb that teaches us, “Tell me and I may forget; show me and I may remember**; involve me** and I’ll understand.” Participation in sports goes hand in hand with learning. It works to cement deep understanding through involvement in a group dynamic. Coaching in sports supports mental acuity and focus, and all of that is possible thanks to educational institutions like TSU that support both mental and physical growth.

I recently retired as Chair of the Department of Human Performance and Sport Science at TSU. TSU offers a wonderful program with four areas of concentration in the undergraduate area. They are: Physical Education Teacher Education, Exercise Science, Athletic Training, and Health Education Teacher Education. There are also 2 concentrations at the graduate level, and they are Sports Administration and Exercise Science. Both of the degree programs have augmented the growth of TSU and the numbers of matriculating students and increased graduation rates have been a real plus for the University.

I’d also like to acknowledge someone that I consider to be very special. There is one TSU graduate from Atlanta that I am particularly proud of. His name is Jonathan Edwards. He had a distinguished career playing college football at TSU and has gone on to earn his Master’s degree in Teacher Education. I had the pleasure of observing Jonathan in action this past summer during one of the many summer camps that are conducted on campus. He handled the children in his charge without any problems and inspired them to have a wonderful summer experience. I am sure that at least several of those summer camp participants were imoved by Jonathan’s ease and support and I will bet that he will be an inspiration when it comes time for the next generation to fulfill their legacies. People like Jonathan create the possibility for future generations to contribute, mentor, coach and teach others and we should all be very proud of him. Jonathan is a shining example of the promise the future. He acknowledges his mother as his source of strength and inspiration and he inspires others with his patience, his faith and his devotion to his family. Jonathan has a lovely wife named \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and a beautiful young daughter, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and I am honored to share today’s celebration with his mother, Mrs. Vivian Napier, who is my special guest today. I am touched by the way Jonathan reveres his mother’s contribution to his life and I am reminded of the strength, courage, curiosity, confidence and resilience instilled in me by my mother and grandmother. To Mrs. Napier, congratulations on doing a fine job in raising, teaching and inspiring your son. Thanks to people like you, our children and their children will have a brighter future.

I think it’s evident in all that I have shared that so far, I have lived a rich and blessed life. Although not without its challenges, I was given priceless gifts by my family and its heritage. My grandmother may not have gotten past the fourth grade, but she was one smart woman! She innately knew the power and necessity of having an education. She taught my mother to persevere. She taught all of us that there was no such thing as failure or limitations. We learned to learn, to dream, to live and to fulfill our dreams. My grandmother taught my mother how to be a good person and a better parent. My mother was relentless in teaching us even more than my grandmother taught her. Because my mother was lucky enough to have a parent who knew what she was missing, education was of prime importance in our household. When I look back on my youth, I have to say that the opportunities and experiences I had were really beyond my wildest dreams. I am so blessed to have experienced all of it, as everything taught me to appreciate the next adventure even more. The doctors said I had asthma. My mother sent me off to learn to swim. The doctors said I had to limit my activities. I walked 6 miles back and forth to do the almost impossible. I coached and I was snubbed, but I got myself together and went on to learn and win and achieve. I broke my ankle and from that I went on to break down boundaries in the world of collegiate sports. And it was all possible because my grandmother and mother knew of the power of education.

As I said, I am at a new juncture in my life. Who knows what the future will bring? What I do know is that I hope to be able to mentor, coach and inspire many generations of people for years to come. As some of you may know, my accomplishments in the sport of golf have served as the framework for a movie entitled, “From The Rough,” and it is my hope that a whole new audience will learn about and be inspired by the adventures and milestones I experienced while establishing the golf team. Although the story has gotten the “Hollywood treatment,” it is an inspirational message that I hope will encourage everyone, especially women, to make a difference in the lives of people, especially our youth-our legacy. I feel that they will understand the need to build collective confidence in themselves and those they teach.

I will always remember the difference made in the lives of those that I have had the opportunity to coach and teach. I will treasure my memories of every unique adventure as long as I live and I know that Tennessee State University helped me to envision and reach my goals. Tennessee State University is now 100 years old. Although it has endured challenges and transformations, it is the people who care-the educators, the administrators, the students and the alumni, that give this institution its life and breadth and depth. The history of this organization is as organic as the people who have taught here and have attended its classes. Although we have had the privilege of sharing our campus with some famous and distinguished graduates like Oprah Winfrey, Wilma Rudolph, Bobby Jones, and Moses Gunn, to name just a few, it is the contribution of **everyone** that makes the difference in our world. TSU graduates share their gift of knowledge in every walk of life and I know that thanks to all we have learned at TSU, our children and their children have the chance to have even richer lives than we have-in whatever field they may choose. But I have to also say that now is not the time to be complacent or to rest on all that we have collectively accomplished. It is up to each one of us to make sure that the future of TSU is secure for generations to come. It is our turn to support the programs and policies set forth by TSU and its alumni associations so that future generations continue to learn and grow, blossom and inspire thanks to the priceless education and life lessons received at TSU.

Thank you all!