**15293, Wylecia Harris, 20 Minutes, Due April 14**

Revolution and Wisdom: Keeping Your Voice Through the Ages

Good Afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen,

Welcome to University President \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and all the faculty and staff present, as well as the families and friends of today’s graduates. Congratulations to our all of our graduates. You have worked hard and accomplished much in order to stand here today. You should be very proud of those accomplishments.

My emotions are full to overflowing today, returning here so many years after my own graduation in 1982. I can say with certainty that the genesis of my civic engagement and leadership were birthed right here on this campus. It was here that I learned what it meant to involve myself in the activities of the society in which I live. I had a great experience here at Wittenberg University. This campus is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. The architecture is inspiring, the landscaping is breathtaking and the atmosphere conducive to both learning and expression.

Tom Brokaw said, “You are educated. Your certification is in your degree. You may think of it as the ticket to the good life. Let me ask you to think of an alternative. Think of it as your ticket to change the world.”

More than the appearance were the opportunities to become and grow as a leader. Opportunities that rose out of a history of education, encouragement and training. I had the opportunity to start Delta Sigma Theta, Omicron Theta chapter as well as bring G Gordon Liddy to campus. I was privileged to serve as a campus tour guide, showing off the placed I loved to new students and their families. Already I felt like I was encouraging and mentoring those who would come after me. Believe it or not, I even worked with the rabbits/rats in the lab one summer. Boy, I really wanted that degree. I can’t stand rats at all and I’m not that fond of rabbit. But, it was a challenge and I met it because it helped me to grow into a leader.

Henry David Thoreau said, “I have learned this at least by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dream, and endeavors to live the life which he had imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

After my graduation I left Wittenberg and Springfield, Ohio with such excitement. I was idealistic, full of possibilities, and full of hope. Although I was unsure of the future, I was not afraid to give voice to my hopes and dreams and less likely to give voice to my fears. Over the years I learned many lessons, lessons about life, lessons about society, and lessons about my own civic responsibility.

Albert Einstein said, “The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

There were times when I lost my voice, times when I wasn’t sure what my voice sounded like. Then, as life continued I regained my voice and realized that it was stronger because of having lost it for a while. The journey was hard sometimes but it was worth every effort and every lesson because of what I learned at each juncture.

Today, standing here in the place where my journey to leadership and civic responsibility began, I have the same idealism. I feel full of possibilities, full of hope, I am still unsure of the future and more likely to give voice to my fears. But, in giving voice to my fears I am better able to face them and overcome them. What happened between the revolutionary thinking youth that I was and the wisdom thinking of age that I now possess, that refined my character and brought me here today? Life happened. I lived life to the fullest. I didn’t sit around and wait for responsibility and leadership opportunities to find me. I went after them, just as I did here at Wittenberg.

What sage advice can I offer you as you take flight on your own journey, to convey the importance of not losing your voice, or if you do lose your voice along life’s way, now to find it again, just as I did? You have to run at life, chase the opportunities and take full advantage of them.

I have this premise that systematic social change requires both revolutionary thinking and actions as witnessed by movements and rallies and internal change agents who bring wisdom. We are in an election year, one that has been electric and magnetic regardless of which political party you support. I encourage each of you to become active in civic engagement. Don’t sit on the sidelines as we face this upcoming election but remain engaged in the work necessary to create a more perfect democracy. This is a cause especially important to me since I am the executive director of the League of Women Voters.

When you become involved with civic engagement you will develop a voice, whether you felt as if you had one before or not. It is impossible to become active in the ways of society and remain passive or even to remain silent. Just having an opinion requires you to make decisions. You have to decide what is important to you and what you are willing to do about. That is where your voice comes in. You have read about or heard about some famous people and right away you could name those people because they had a definitive voice. I don’t mean the sound of their voice, although that may stand out as well. But, I mean their opinions and the stand they take on certain values and social issues. That’s why television skits are so popular. Actors imitate life, and even if they do it in fun, they show us how strong a person’s voice is if they take a stand for what they believe.

But, voice is not only important for speaking up for what you believe. Voice is also important when you are speaking up for those who can’t speak for themselves. Whether it is the unborn, or the disabled or simply those who are afraid to speak out, those of us who have the calling, yes, the calling, to speak out, have a responsibility to speak out strongly for those who can’t or who don’t know how.

You ask, “Where can I exercise my opportunities to use my voice?” Well, there are more opportunities than you will ever have the time to use. You can use your voice in politics from the local to the national or even international level. You can use your voice by working in business, by working in the non-profit sector as I have done. You can use your voice in your everyday lives by simply living what you believe, by walking the walk and not just talking the talk. Anyone can talk, but can you live out what you believe every day, regardless of whether everything is going great or going terrible?

All through your life there will influencers who help you find and keep your voice. It’s important that you recognize them and the difference they made in your life so that one day you can make a difference in the life of someone else.

In my life there are a few that I’d like to make not of:

Mary Lou Culp was an admissions counselor who visited Stuttgart, Germany and described this beautiful campus. Because of her I applied and came sight unseen, having seen it through the lens of an influencer and wisdom maker. My parents, grandparents and all those who came before with their generations of strengths and perseverance and who taught me that I was as good as anyone else. John Paul was an early career mentor who saw and cultivated potential in me that I couldn’t see. Irene Pollin was a mid-career influencer who taught me about power and lasting friendship that evolves through the ages. From a little girl when I worked for her to the friend she became later.

There will be times when you are on your own personal journey from the revolution of youth to the sage of the ages, when you may feel like you have lost your voice. But, don’t give up. Just keep walking toward your goal and keep standing your ground for what you believe. You will regain your balance; you will regain your voice; you will come back stronger than ever, if you just keep going and don’t give up.

As you travel on this journey of life you will be faced with regular choices. Be sure to study those choices and discover how they will affect and influence society. Part of how you can do this is to study history and how previous generations choices have affected their society and those that came after them. It has been said that those who do not study history will be doomed to repeat it. We need to learn what has happened before us and learn from the mistakes of the past and our own mistakes so that we can go forward and do better.

Life is hard and having a life worth living requires us to be resilient enough to survive whatever life throws at us. It requires perseverance to push through when you see the world differently and when you march to the beat of a different drum.

No one knows the future, not really. We may know what we suspect, but we can’t know the reality. Everyone, no matter who they are or where they come from can escape having some fears of the unknown. There is nothing wrong with fearing the unknown, as long as we don’t succumb to those fears and refuse to move forward and do what is required of us.

You may think that my passion and my energy come from my struggle, but they do not. I am able to travel through my struggles because of my passion and my energy. There is power in struggle, the strength to carry on no matter what happens in life. That struggle refines our character; it requires us to look at our true self and know there is more that we can do, and it drives us to strive to become a better version of ourselves. It believe that it is important to believe both in self and the self, other than self. That, for me, is my spirituality, and it is my faith that sustains me through the good and tough times.

Each of you has a chosen profession. The core skills of that profession, whatever profession you have chosen, will help you navigate that journey from the revolutionary and youth idealism to the wisdom of age. But, there are strategies that you can use to discover, keep and regain your voice throughout your life.

Ed Koch said, “The fireworks begin today. Each diploma is a lighted match, each one of you is a fuse.”

First, you have to be willing to grow and continually be learning. There will never come a point in time or experience where you will have “arrived”. No one reaches that in this life. You must develop, if you don’t already have, a thirst and a hunger for learning.

Carol Burnett said, “We don’t stop going to school when we graduate.”

You must be willing to change and re-invent yourself along your life’s journey yet stay in alignment with your core values. To do that you must first study yourself and decide what core values you possess. Don’t ever sacrifice those values. Surround yourself with people who will love and cherish you, but people who will give you a swift kick in the butt when needed, and will stop you cold if you try to stray from those core values. You must always insist on forward movement. Learn from the past, but don’t live in the past. Let it be and take the lessons you learned so you can have a better future.

Make sure that you fail fast and get up quickly. Don’t put off lessons you know you must learn. Learn early that you aren’t perfect and neither is anyone else. Don’t let others intimidate you because you think they are more than they are. They are people, just like you, who have learned their own hard lessons and fell flat on their face a few times. They had to learn to get back up on their feet just like you. Don’t settle for less than you deserve, but don’t think too highly of yourself at the expense of others. Remember, you’re not better than them either. Learning life’s lessons will show what you are made of and failure probably shows a better picture than any success. It’s easy to celebrate when you succeed. It’s much harder to get up, brush yourself off, and start walking to the future again when you have failed miserably. But, a person of strong character will do that. You can’t give up. You have to keep moving and keep doing all you can to make a difference in society. Someday when you die you will leave some type of legacy. What will it be?

I leave you with one last quote that I hope you’ll enjoy.

Dr. Seuss said, “Be who you are and say what you feel, because those who mind don’t matter and those who matter don’t mind.”

Thank you.