



*The Bernard P. McDonough Center
for Leadership and Business
at Marietta College*

ALUMNI SPEAKER:

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McDonough Center for Leadership and Business
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Speech delivered by Michele Stallings '94, Registrar/Testing Coordinator, KIPP Pride High School, North Carolina, to the 24th cohort of McDonough Scholars during the 2010 EXCEL Workshop on August 15, 2010.

This past June, I proudly watched as 56 students donned their royal blue caps and gowns and marched...well maybe the word strutted or swaggered would be more appropriate...across the stage at the second commencement in the history of our high school, KIPP Pride High. These were my 5th grade “babies who back in 2002, learned about the scientific method, gained insight on how to use pipettes, test tubes, and microscopes correctly, and were conducting experiments to see how changing different variables with a pendulum would affect the rate at which it oscillated. Just a year ago, in 2009, I had the same privilege as I watched, teary eyed and full of pride, as the 48 members of our first ever graduating class took those final steps toward entering the college of their choice.

To many of you, the picture I have just painted doesn't seem anything out of the ordinary. High school graduation day, for many of us, is much like a holiday. Every year, millions of young adults and their families celebrate it around the world. It is a day of excitement, yet uncertainty of the unknown, as young men and women cross the threshold from what many consider their youth into the first true steps of adulthood and independence. However, for the teens in rural eastern North Carolina where I have worked for the last 12 years, graduation day isn't necessarily a given.

In order to understand what a huge accomplishment graduation was for these students, let me take a minute to point out some facts about the town in which we are located, which is Gaston, NC. Although our community as a whole is 59% African American and 39%

Caucasian, the local public school systems are 95% African American, where the average SAT scores fall between 780 and 910. These statistics clearly show the remains of segregation still present in our area.

Our students are also faced with the fact that rates for teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases in our county are among the highest in the state of North Carolina. In our county, 45 out of every 1000 girls ages 15-17 get pregnant every year. When you glance at these statistics, it is easy to see how many young people in our area get easily deterred from following the right path in life and how obtaining a quality education had been unfathomable. However, because of the strong community of students, parents, and teachers that have chosen to work hard and be a part of educational reform, we HAVE proven what is possible not only in rural North Carolina, but across the United States.

In the early 1990s, two young men, Mike Levin and David Feinberg joined a national teaching program called Teach for America. During their two year commitment to teaching students in Houston's independent school district, they became quite aware of the injustices in the educational system and they realized that education in their area had become stagnant. As a result of what they experienced in Houston that year, they decided it was time to make some drastic changes. What if we started going to school until 5:00pm? What if we went two Saturdays out of the month and two weeks extra during the summer? What if school was fun and innovative? What if we held our kids responsible and provided rewards and consequences for their actions? It was questions like these that led to the inception of what is now known as KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program). After much struggle, but with a steadfast determination, Mike and Dave opened KIPP Houston. KIPP NY expanded in the next few years, and in 2001 KIPP Gaston NC, along with KIPP DC and another KIPP Houston school were born. Currently, there are over 70 KIPP schools nationally, and whereas they are typically grades 5-8, they have expanded in recent years to also include several high school and a handful of elementary schools.

In 1990, when I sat in this same exact place as you and your families are currently sitting, I HAD absolutely NO intention of ever teaching. When I came to Marietta, my eyes were set on only one goal—becoming a doctor. When I graduated from high school, I had applied to NEOUCOM, where you can do a dual program and get your medical degree in as little as 5 years. AND I GOT ACCEPTED. But after some consideration, I turned down the offer and decided to take the traditional educational route, because I wanted the complete package when it comes to a college experience.

In the first few months of being in the leadership program, we were presented with our first task—to pair up with a community organization so that we could begin fulfilling our community service hours. Since I was still dead set on being a doctor, I thought that volunteering with an organization in that field would be beneficial. So, I paired up with the America Cancer Society and served on their board and I also did some work with additional health care based organizations in the community. However, after a few months, I quickly realized that the pieces of the puzzle weren't fitting together nicely. I needed something else...an opportunity that I was passionate about and that I had a

strong connection to.

After several more failed attempts at finding something that I genuinely could commit to, the program director at the YMCA came to campus looking for people to help with the youth programs and sports. The commitments would mostly be on Saturday, which worked perfectly with my chemistry lab schedule so I started helping coach and officiate youth sports and run special events like lock ins and fun days.

And what was just an attempt to find something that would suffice for completing my service hours quickly turned into a life altering experience for me. My involvement with different programs at the Y finally brought my true passion to the forefront—working with children.

Over the next four years, I continued volunteering at the Y, easily accruing several thousand service hours. Yearly, I helped recruit at least 5-10 other Marietta students to volunteer and my circle of influence kept expanding on campus and in the community. While that may seem like an enormous feat, what's most impressive is the fact that I had finally discovered the true me.

During my junior year, I went to my first day of biology, the last course requirement for premed that was outside of my chemistry major. I sat there for about 30 minutes, and said to myself...I'm done. I'm not going to med school. And I got up and walked out of class in the middle of Dr. Tschunko's lecture. Thus began what I like to refer to as my aimless journey through the next few years.

The next summer, my required internship experience was at the Embarcadero YMCA in San Francisco, California, and the summer after I graduated, I worked at the Sheridan Wyoming YMCA in the summer camp program. I was committed to the YMCA's mission, and I felt that my personal values were aligned with what the Y was doing in the community.

Upon returning from Wyoming after the summer of 1994, I began the job search for a Y job, with much struggle. The Y is a very close knit community, even nationally. After many months of failed attempts at finding a job, my aimless journey continued. I applied to graduate school in Forensic Science at George Washington University in Washington DC, was admitted, and on moving day, just couldn't go. Something in my heart was saying—this just isn't right for you. A year or so later, I applied to a PhD chemistry program at Colorado State University, and was once again accepted. I packed up my little Honda with all of my earthly possessions and drove cross country, taking what I thought was a smart detour in that aimless journey I had been on for years. However, that journey was short lived, because I was back on the road, headed home in less than 24 hours. I knew right away that I had made the wrong decision.

I want you to understand that at that time in my life, I was still in the mindset that I needed to do something in my major, which was chemistry, and to please other people in my life, like my mother, my professors here at Marietta, and even my high school

teachers back in northeastern Ohio. But something was missing...what I was truly passionate about...and that was being with children and working with people. I didn't belong locked up in a lab doing research.

In the fall of 1997, I made a phone call to my college advisor, Dr. Debbie Egolf and said plainly...HELP!!! She listened through the tears and hysterical blabbering and said...have you ever heard of Teach for America? She continued, and I listened between sobs. She said that this would be a good way for me to work with children and use my chemistry background.

Within ten minutes, I was on the road to the local university, and I got a copy of the application, which was a 20-page booklet that required 4 or 5 essays and the deadline was the NEXT DAY. After pulling an all nighter and a quick trip to the post office, my application was on its way. Several months later, I found out that I was accepted and was slated to teach Chemistry and Physics in rural North Carolina. Although teach for America only requires a two-year commitment, I found myself finally entrenched in what I felt passionate about, and I stayed at my placement site for an additional year. For once, I finally felt as though I was "giving back the gift" that not only my leadership experience at Marietta College, but the whole Marietta community provided me during my time here.

About half way through my third year, I was presented with the opportunity to be on the founding staff of this new charter school that they were opening up in Northampton County, about 45 minutes away. It was a KIPP school, which meant going to school from 7:30-5:00 everyday and from 9-1 on Saturdays twice a month. While many people would balk at the idea of working those kinds of hours, I embraced the opportunity to provide a high quality, rigorous college prep, FREE education to students who otherwise may not have access to it.

In the spring of 2001, 80 determined families in rural Gaston, North Carolina, enrolled their children in Gaston College Preparatory even before we had buses, teachers, or even a building. In fact, when I signed my contract, they asked, do you want to see the school and I said yes, and they drove me to a wide open 27 acre peanut field. THERE WAS NO BUILDING. Despite the lack of tangible resources, we, the staff, along with those courageous parents and children, believed that those 27 acres would become a school filled with new opportunities. We had a vision. We had a goal. We were on a mission. We all believed that hard work, determination, and commitment have the power to revolutionize education in a historically underperforming community.

Over the course of a year, that once overlooked peanut field in the middle of rural North Carolina transformed into a school filled with students, parents, and teachers hungry for knowledge, college, and power. The school continued to add new grades each year and now that field has become KIPP GCP (grades 5-8) and Pride High (grades 9-12), a campus serving 675 students where academic excellence and outstanding character are the expectations. There are no excuses made for any students; they are all capable of success in high school, college, and most importantly, life, despite their socio economic

background, learning disabilities, or language barriers. The consistent hard work and determination of our students, parents, and staff has created remarkable success. When our first group of fifth graders entered our school, only 49% were at grade level according to North Carolina State Testing. By the end of their first year, 93% of those students were at or above grade level, with 100% meeting that mark in both reading and math by the end of their third year. Our founding class went on to earn a 100% college acceptance rate, with each student being accepted to least two four-year colleges or universities, and collectively earning 2.5 million dollars in scholarships.

Trust me, the journey that I took to get where I am in life today, hasn't been easy. There have been unexpected twists and turns, and MANY detours and potholes and dead ends. I have made mistakes, but more importantly, I have learned from them. I don't regret any of the decisions I have made, because they have only made me a stronger, more insightful person. When I look back at those first few years after Marietta, the ONLY thing I wish I had done differently is discovered my true passion sooner.

While I have come a long way on my journey, and found other people to join me on my travels who believe and support the same goals and vision that I have, I still haven't reached my destination and I'm not sure I ever will. Because not until ALL students have access to being empowered with the skills, knowledge, and character to succeed in college, strengthen their communities, and fight for social justice and ALL schools are bought in to working extremely hard to build a culture of excellence, high expectations, and hard work will this job be complete.

So as you take this next step along your own path to doing what you are passionate about, I'd like to leave you with three lessons I have learned:

1. KNOWELDGE IS POWER

During the next four years, take the opportunity to learn as much as you can both in and out of the classroom. Although a lot of the reading and studies I did through the leadership program and that I still do today help me gain insight into myself as a leader, some of my most meaningful learning, however, came from actual hands on experiences. If it wasn't for my YMCA involvement back in the early 90's, I may have never discovered what really made me happy and what was meaningful to me. Get involved on campus and the larger Marietta community – study abroad, do summer programs, travel during vacations, and volunteer. Explore the world and expose yourself to different cultures. Be brave and learn new skills. If this is the message we at KIPP give our students in high school, why shouldn't college student benefit from the same words or encouragement? Remember that 95% predominantly African America community where the median household income is approximately 13,000 dollars? Well, those students have traveled and studied in Costa Rica, Egypt, Turkey, and Mexico. They have volunteered at the local hospital, they have tutored young children, and they have campaigned for local and national politicians. If they can do it, so can you. Yet, at the same time, don't over commit. Manage your time wisely and always make time for yourself.

2. WORK HARD

Despite what some people think, success and opportunities don't just fall in your lap. It takes tremendous time, effort, and commitment to achieve and to make a difference, no matter what end you have in mind. Everyday, our staff works 7:30-5:00 at school with the students, and some start their days as early as 6 a.m. and end as late as midnight. Tomorrow is our first day of school and when I leave here today, I will get back to town around 2 a.m. And I will be heading to the school at 2 a.m. to make sure everything is ready for when the kids arrive at 7:30 tomorrow. And I won't be the only one there. Every morning when I go to work, I remember that what I do is NOT about me. It's about all of the people who reap the benefits of what we collectively do on our campus, from the kids and their parents, to the community and society as a whole. So no matter what career or life choices you make, remember that you must remain selfless, that as a leader, one of your tasks is to empower others, not to bask in the limelight. Model humility.

And finally...

3. THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS

Excellence in leadership is only possible through personal growth and reflection. One early fault of many emerging leaders is that they become overly confident and content when success comes quickly and without much effort. But to truly become leader with sustainable results, you must constantly self-reflect and be willing and able to grow through learning from your mistakes and capitalizing on your successes. You can't settle on being mediocre; strive for excellence.

I wish you all the best as you begin YOUR journey. Start with an open mind and a clean slate and use all of the skills, knowledge and experiences you gain to help you discover your inner passion.

About Michele Stallings '94:

In 2001, Michele was part of the founding staff of KIPP Gaston College Preparatory (GCP) in Gaston, North Carolina, serving as the 5th grade science teacher. In 2009, after seven years, she transitioned across the peanut field and is currently in her second year as the Registrar and Testing Coordinator at KIPP Pride High School. While at GCP, Michele served as the fifth grade chair person for five years and planned all four grade level end-of-year-trips. She also served three years as the science department chair and assisted the school leader with scheduling and campus logistics. Before joining KIPP staff in 2001, Michele taught high school Chemistry and Physics for three years at Warren High School, her Teach for America placement site. Michele earned her B.S. in Chemistry with a minor in French from Marietta College in 1994. In the McDonough Leadership Program, Michele was a member of the first cohort that had the option of pursuing a minor in Leadership Studies and did her volunteer work at the Marietta Family YMCA.