

SPRING 2007 ORIENTATION ADDRESS

SOUTHERN VERMONT COLLEGE

My name is Karen Gross, and as President of Southern Vermont College, I want to welcome everyone here this evening.

In particular, I want to welcome our new incoming students, both our new first-year students and our transfer students together with their families and friends.

I also want to welcome back to campus our returning students as well as our faculty and staff.

A new year is an opportunity to reflect on one's hopes and dreams for the future, and in my brief remarks tonight, I want to share some of my hopes and dreams for you. I have a feeling that 2007 will be a wonderful year.

In a few moments, each of the new students will hear his/her name read and then receive a book that has been signed by every member of the Southern Vermont College community – from the dining staff to our faculty and senior administrators.

I should point out that students who entered in August received the same book – with the same signatures – although my remarks at that time were vastly longer than those tonight.

This book is our way of welcoming you to our community. When you graduate two or three or four years from now, you will receive another book, also signed by every member of the Southern Vermont Community. We want these two books to be the bookends of your undergraduate education. And, years from now – as you reflect on your life in college, when your own children are thinking about college – you will look at these two books and remember your undergraduate years -- with fond and warm memories.

The book you will be receiving is called A PATRIOT'S HANDBOOK written and compiled by Caroline Kennedy. The book is about how we can be a patriot other than by fighting in a war – it is a book about the many ways we can make our nation proud – through art, through work in the community, through dissent, through song, through commitment to family, through caretaking of the environment. The book celebrates the values that we, as a nation, hold dear including liberty and equality and community.

I want to pick up on one theme from the book and use it as a way to speak to you about my hopes for you in 2007 and beyond. The theme I want to address is pride.

Pride is, to be sure, a complex word. Sometimes it is used in a negative sense – too much pride is looked upon as arrogance. People with too much pride often fall from grace – the consequences of hubris. Pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins. I appreciate these connotations but I am not talking here about excessive pride.

I am talking about a different meaning of pride – the positive meaning.

The Old French root of the word pride means “brave and valiant.” For me, that is a start at getting at the real meaning of pride. As Jane Austen said in her novel “Pride and Prejudice” and I agree with her, “you can be proud without being vain.” Indeed, being proud is hugely important to success.

Charles Dickens, in his novel “Nicolas Nickleby,” observed that while pride is one of the Seven Deadly Sins, it cannot be viewed that way in all contexts. Otherwise, what would explain a mother’s (institutional leader’s) pride – which is a combination of faith in and hope for her children (students).

For me, pride is about self-respect and respect for others. It is about the feeling and celebrating the joy in one’s own accomplishments and the accomplishments of others. Pride is a feeling that accompanies success.

- It is an emotion that allows one to rise to heights one might not have anticipated.
- It is an emotion that – once felt – one always wants to feel again (it is much like love in that way).

As an anonymous author wrote: pride is a personal commitment. It is an attitude which separates excellence from mediocrity.

And I want you to quest for and be excellent – and that is why I think pride is so important.

And so, here are my hopes for you:

I hope this coming year will give you many opportunities to be proud of yourself.

I hope you will be proud of your accomplishments in the classroom.

I hope you will be proud of your many achievements outside the classroom – in the athletic field, in educative experiences outside the classroom, in relationships with new and old friends.

I hope you will be proud of the decisions you made and the roads both taken and not taken.

But, there is another piece to this:

I also hope you will be proud of your college – and the faculty and staff within in it, *and* I want you to share your institutional pride with others – your families, your friends and complete outsiders.

And there is yet another part to this:

We have to work to make you proud of us as an institution. We try to do that day in and day out. We take pride in what we do and the education and learning we provide to you – in and out of the classroom. That is part of my commitment to you – to make you proud of the institution that will be awarding you your degree.

I think we can do our part and I think you can do your part.

For all my hopes for you and for us as an institution, one thing is true – pride – and being proud -- do not just appear... Pride needs to be earned. You and we have to work for excellence in and out of the classroom. Sometimes it takes courage to move ahead. Sometimes it takes a valiant effort to make progress.

Making us and yourself proud does not mean that everything will always go right. Our making you proud also does not mean you will like every decision we make. It does not mean everything will be easy.

Over the holidays, I read a book (a really moving -- and short book) by Calvin Trillin. The whole book is about 75 pages long. The book is titled “About Alice” and it is about Trillin’s wife, Alice, who died in 2001. In a way, the book is Trillin’s love letter to his most beloved wife.

At one point in the book, Trillin notes that he and his wife recognized that they may not have made it sufficiently clear to their daughters “how difficult we knew it could be to get through the imperfect patches that occur in everyone’s life.”

Somehow, they had acted as if they expected their children to sail through life without trouble and without complaining. I suspect I made the same mistake with my son, too.

So, Alice decided to rectify this false impression about life in a letter to one of her daughters several years before she died. I want, with due credit to Alice and Calvin Trillin, to editorialize a bit and adapt her insights for you and for us.

As you get older (Alice wrote and as now I write in an expanded version), you will begin to understand that we do not care about you because you are perfect and never make mistakes. We care about you because you are decent and hard working and honest and thoughtful and can figure out how to recover from your mistakes and learn from them. We care about you because we believe you will always deal with what life brings you -- within and outside this college -- with courage and respect for others.

I am proud of SVC and its students. For our newest students, I am sure you will do yourselves and the institution proud. I hope, too, that as an institution, we will make you proud.

The accomplishment of both of these goals will make me proud.

A warm welcome to each and every one of you.

Thank-you.