

2013 Distinguished Teacher of the Year

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Good afternoon, Provost Claiborne, distinguished colleagues, students and friends of Florida Atlantic University.

I am very grateful and humbled by this honor, especially to have been included in the same group as all the distinguished nominees. Aside from being called Mother by the four most amazing people on the planet, this is the biggest honor of my life. However, no man, or woman, is an island. There are educators, mentors, colleagues, friends and family members who have encouraged, supported and guided me, such as my teaching mentor, Dr. Charlotte Barry, my research mentor, Dr. Christine Williams, my research dean, Dr. Patricia Liehr, and my constant encourager, Dr. Cynthia Blum. I am genuinely grateful to you all, as I am to all of my faculty colleagues and our staff, whose doors are open to my constant questions.

I would like to share three themes with you today: gratitude, grasp and growth.

I begin with a story about a teacher who impacted my life at an early age. I was 17 and about to graduate from high school in the spring of 1971. Go ahead, do the math. I know you want to. I had auditioned and been accepted by the University of Houston as a music major, playing the flute. Truthfully, my flute abilities were only fair; however, it was all I had ever dreamed of. Being a nurse had never even been on my radar. With about a month left of my senior year, Mrs. Patricia Zehm, my sociology teacher, required us to do a service project, so I became a candy striper (a teenage volunteer) at Texas Children's Hospital. After a few weeks of pushing around wheelchairs and carrying specimens of various bodily fluids to the lab, I was assigned to the neonatal intensive care unit. After spending the day with those incredible and caring nurses, I knew what I had to do. The next morning, I walked into the office of my high school counselor and told him, "I'm supposed to be a nurse." The course of my life's journey changed dramatically that day, and nursing has been and continues to be a fabulous ride.

Once I began nursing school, I knew I wanted to be a nurse educator, and I planned to go to graduate school immediately. However, financial constraints, marriage, four babies, a few cross country moves and several nursing jobs held those dreams in

abeyance. So in my 40s I returned to school for a master's in theology and in my 50s for a master's and Ph.D. in nursing. So it is 38 years later and I have finally realized my dream and being a nurse educator is more than I ever dreamed it would be. I love what I do. So never give up on your dreams. I never told Mrs. Zehm how she impacted my life, and she passed away 22 years ago. So if you have an educator whom you know has impacted your life, please show your gratitude and tell him or her thank you.

I want to talk about "releasing your grasp." My parents were amazing role models and taught me that whatever you have, no matter how little, you are meant to share. At Florida Atlantic University, we have within our grasp all of the state-of-the-art resources that are conducive to creating the best possible environment for instruction and learning. Reaping such opportunity and privilege, however, gives us the responsibility and obligation to reach farther than our grasp, and, indeed, release our grasp and share not only our resources, but our very selves, and extend the influence of Florida Atlantic University beyond our classrooms and campuses, and, indeed, even beyond our borders.

As a member of the faculty of the Christine E. Lynn College of Nursing, I have had some transformative experiences doing just that. I have accompanied colleagues and students to Belle Glade and Pahokee, where we provided health screenings and school physicals for many families with difficult access to health care. We recently held a health screening and education day at the shelter house of the Aid for Victims of Domestic Abuse. We have taken students to our nation's capital to meet with our elected senators and representatives in order to advocate for health care policies. I have been able to travel with my colleague, Dr. Barry, to Uganda, to teach graduate level nurses and guide them toward their master's degrees, thus creating a faculty for a small university in Mbarara, Uganda. Now those nurse educators are teaching the next generation of nurses there.

We also started a 501(c)3 corporation, which funds a school nurse for a Ugandan primary school of 800 children. I have traveled with Drs. Gordon, King, and Barry to Cambodia, providing education and service to an orphanage and a women's development center. I have spent a day with school nurses in Beijing, China, sharing our experiences in school nursing. We have gone to Haiti to conduct a community-based health assessment to begin a collaborative work with a community in Bondeau.

During this academic year, we began a collaborative work in Guatemala, enabling Dr. Lynne Palma and I to take 18 of our students to Antigua, where we formed a coalition with six non-governmental organizations. Those 18 students provided primary care to over 1,300 Guatemalan Mayans in their rural villages high in the mountains. It was the first time most of our patients had ever seen a health care provider. We also screened

over 400 women for cervical cancer, a preventable and curable disease, which, for lack of early detection and treatment, causes the deaths of a disproportionately high number of women in Guatemala.

The students experienced how to care for others without the resources to which we are accustomed here – no X-rays, no labs, no EKGs, no CT scans, no MRIs, just themselves, their stethoscopes and their desire to truly care for and make a difference in the lives of the indigenous peoples of Guatemala. They learned that a caring, human touch can break down artificial barriers caused by language and cultural diversities.

I have heard it said that there are three existential moments in life – the moment of birth, the moment of death and the moment of falling in love for the first time, because you cease to be an “I” person and become a “Thou” person. I think there are more than three of these moments. I would add the first time you look into the face of your newborn child, because you are changed forever, and I would add when you truly give of yourself to another. Martin Buber, the great Jewish existential theologian, said, “As soon as we touch another, we are touched by a breath of eternal life.” And from amidst the Holocaust, Viktor Frankl said, “Success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one’s personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one’s surrender to a person other than oneself.” This trip was indeed life-changing for our students. I learned from my students that learning takes place outside of the classroom in a far more profound way than inside the classroom. And I have never been more proud of our students from the College of Nursing, who exhibited a level of caring and courage that made me weep. None of this would have been possible without the support of the College of Nursing, my dean, my students and the hard-working people in the Office of International Programs. So our reach should always extend our grasp as we make Florida Atlantic University the exemplar for academic institutions by reaching out to those who may benefit from our care, skills, knowledge and expertise.

As educators, we are promoting growth for the future. I have a favorite proverb which reads, “A culture flourishes when people plant trees under which they may never sit.” My sociology teacher planted a tree for my future. She never knew of its treasures, but I have enjoyed that tree, its shade, its protection, its fruit and its sturdiness. So the educators of today are planting trees under which we will never sit, for a future that, according to my favorite poet, Kahlil Gibran, “We cannot even visit, not even in our dreams.” We are planting trees for your future and we entrust that future to you, to grow, to blossom, to produce good fruit, to provide nourishment for the hungry, to provide shade and rest for the weary, encouragement for the hopeless and guidance for the lost. In other words, to be the decent, caring human beings you are meant to be. Then, just as it should follow, it someday will be your turn to sow the seeds for the

harvest of the next generation. You can make the world a better place. If you do not like your world, then change it. Commit to investing yourselves not only to your future, but to the future of those who will follow you. Live as if for eternity. As Dr. Don Marietta, the 1981 Distinguished Teacher of the Year, stated, "Put more emphasis on creativity, and beauty, and knowledge, and personal integrity, rather than money." As Dr. Jill Winland-Brown, the 1995 Distinguished Teacher of the Year, said, "We can't wait for things to happen to us; we have to be part of the solution." She encouraged us to be socially responsible and politically active. You can be a change agent for good, if you have a dream.

So I leave you with this charge – to remember these three words: gratitude, grasp and growth. Show your gratitude by thanking an educator. Release your grasp and share your resources and blessings. Grow along your journey while contributing to the growth of others along your way. During the selection process for this award, the panel of students asked me to name one characteristic of an effective educator. I said, "Passion." If I don't love what I do, how could I possibly encourage someone else to want to do what I do? Maya Angelou said, "I believe you can only be great at something you love." As the apostle Paul said to the people of Corinth, "... whatever you do, work at it with all your heart."

I would like to mention four educators who are my role models and who have given me my passion and dedication for teaching. Donna Capparelli, Debra Carter, Dr. Geoff McKee and my fabulous daughter, Dr. Melissa Lesniak. They are my heroes and they change lives for the better, every single day. Thank you for what you do, much of which goes unrecognized, but none of which will go unrewarded.

Congratulations to all the students who have been honored today. Thank you for this honor, and I dedicate this award to Mrs. Patricia Zehm, and educators everywhere, but most especially to my beloved students, from whom and with whom I continue to learn. You are the reason I am here.