

Women's Commission Luncheon Keynote
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Thank you, Jenna. Kristen, thank you and the Women's Commission for inviting me to make the keynote address today.

THE PRIVILEGE OF AGE

I will be retiring from Grand Valley in December, just three months shy of my 70th birthday. I have decided to embrace the role that society is going to assign to me after my retirement. I won't be in charge of anything much. People will expect me occasionally to utter sage advice and tell stories about the way things were, which they probably won't believe but may find quaint. And I'll get to stay up late on Sunday nights, sleep in Monday morning, and sip tea and read a good book in a leisurely fashion anytime I like.

But for the moment, I am still rooted in the world of work and accountability. So it really is a pleasure to have this chance, quite possibly my last, to share something about my journey as a working woman, as a professional, and as a leader, with those of you who come behind.

When you reach the end of a career, it's irresistible to look back on where you began—geographically, intellectually, economically, experientially, psychologically, emotionally—and contemplate how the many aspects of your journey shaped you. In preparing for this talk, I spent some time doing just that. And I found an unexpectedly strong correlation between the remembered story of my life, the growth of my confidence as a woman, and the values that have driven me as a professional and as a leader.

EVERY HUMAN STORY BEGINS WITH GROWING UP

The place, the time and the circumstances of my growing up horrify and fascinate me in equal measures. I grew up in genteel poverty in the 50's in Deep South Mobile, Alabama. The Civil Rights Bill had not been passed and Mobile was probably 30-40% black.

It was a world of extreme contrasts:

Genteel poverty meant that your house might be falling down but money could be found to create antebellum hooped gowns for a coronation pageant at your grammar school.

My clothes came from Sears, a real stigma in society conscious Mobile, but when I got to high school, I was rushed and invited to pledge a social sorority made up of girls who would later become debutantes. My

Grandmother lived in a rented room in a sketchy part of downtown, but I put on white gloves on Saturday morning when I rode the bus downtown to meet her.

My parents were liberal for that time and place. Once we got a car—a hand-me-down from a cousin—my mother would stop at bus stops and pick up maids whenever we were headed downtown and she would drive them home to the projects—she knew from experience how hard it was to ride the bus in the heat. Even more important was the fact that we kids would move to the back seat so the guest could sit in front. In those and other ways my mother was very kind. But she had blindspots where her upbringing showed through. When our black yard men came to mow the lawn, for example, she would put out ice water for them, but afterwards, she would wash their glasses by hand before putting them in the dishwasher. One day I asked her why she did that. She replied that black people had different germs. She must have heard the utter silliness of her answer because she never did it again.

Reconciling these opposing realities has been part of my life's work!

I seem to have been born with a crusading spirit. In junior high school, I embraced two liberal causes, defying just about every social norm in my community:

In eighth grade I worked for John Kennedy's Presidential campaign. basically, I stuffed envelopes after school. I was a Southern Baptist in a town where almost half of the white population was Catholic. Many Protestant pastors were adamantly opposed to the idea of a Catholic President, including my own. My parents did ultimately vote for Kennedy, and after he had been in office a while, my pastor apologized to the congregation for misjudging him.

In the ninth grade, I began a quiet, personal campaign for Civil Rights. I rode a city bus downtown to my school. Coming home I would give up my seat in the front of the bus to the first black person who got on. Then I would go to the very back of the bus and sit down. None of my friends understood why I did it, and I was ultimately made to stand in front of my peers in an assembly and tell everyone why I loved (fill in the N-word here).

On a lighter note, I was President of the Pat Boone Fan Club at a time when everyone else was excited by the Beatles. Club membership peaked at two—me and the Secretary ☺

So I reached 18 with some confidence that I was smart, curious, politically liberal, compassionate and reasonably likeable. I knew I was a person of deep faith. I think I was stigmatized to some degree in high school because I was for

integration. I had only one date in those 4 years that wasn't arranged by someone else. And I wore glasses when they were seriously un-cool. So there were also voices in my head that shamed me for being too ugly, too intense, too awkward, too shy, poorly dressed, and woefully inadequate as a female—labels that would take me **years** to reconcile to a truer image of myself.

College presents many of us with the opportunity to challenge, correct or accept the labels we acquired in childhood. I went to a private Southern Baptist school, Samford University, in Birmingham, AL, where I put myself through with the help of student loans, a little old lady who generously gave me an allowance each month, and summer jobs. I was the first person in my family to go to college. When I got to campus, I took off my glasses and hit the proverbial reset button.

I did well academically; was inducted into a lot of honor societies, graduated magna cum laude, and won the President's Cup at Graduation; even won a very good scholarship to grad school.

But in my mind, my crowning achievements in college were all social:

I was Miss December on a fraternity calendar
I won 3rd place in Glamour Magazine's Best Dressed contest
on my campus--in borrowed clothes, no less! They didn't ask, and I
didn't tell ☺
And I was nominated to be in the campus beauty pageant—where I
was elected Miss Congeniality! A consolation prize, of sorts, but at
least I was on the same stage as the girls who were considered to
be not-ugly!

I went to grad school at Florida State and got a Masters degree in Napoleonic Studies. By the time I graduated, I was married and had a child. I had never thought that I would work after college, but my husband was headed for law school back at our alma mater, so I had no choice. By the weirdest of circumstances, I got a job in the library at Samford. I went with the intention of quitting as soon as my husband graduated law school. I began as secretary to the library director—I couldn't type but he loved having a historian in his office! After a year, I was offered the position of Head of Reader Services, overseeing five library departments and about 40 professionals, support staff and student workers.

For the first time, I was truly a boss, and I began to experience myself in new ways. I found that some of the difficulties I encountered growing up turned into assets when I interacted with the people who reported to me. For example,

Because of my lifelong obsession with fairness, I tried hard to be a fair boss and I expected others to be fair.

Because of the profound dysfunction in my family, understanding and empathy came easily to me, AND I was hard to shock. And believe me, there was always plenty to be shocked at, even at a Baptist University!

Because I struggled so with self-doubt, I instinctively wanted to affirm others.

And because I was not planning to be a librarian for the rest of life, I tended to think outside of the traditional library box. My thinking often resonated with that of the teaching faculty, many of whom had taught me as an undergrad, which allowed me to gain some early professional confidence. That success persuaded me to get my Masters in Library and Information Sciences ten years later.

Another first was that I worked for the first time with an African American, a delightful, petite young woman who was one of the first blacks to attend Samford. She was one of my student assistants and quickly became one of my favorite. I had always been so serious about racial justice, but this student taught me it was okay to lighten up a bit. That December I was frantically mounting a large display window in the library. The students and I had fashioned stained glass windows out of cardboard and cellophane. But we had to drape the entire window in black cloth so the spotlight would highlight only the colored cellophane "windows." We used all of the black cloth we had and were still short. I came back to the circulation desk and proclaimed to the crew that "I just need a little piece of black!" My young woman, without a pause, threw out her arms and declared, "Well, here I am!" I was totally startled, but so spot-on, so funny! I don't think I ever again forgot that even lofty causes can take themselves too seriously.

My years at Samford were mixed. I loved the job and the people I worked with. But I encountered some of the same things I had rebelled against earlier. So sixteen years after I started working, my husband left our marriage and I left my job at Samford to take one in the corporate world.

MIDDLE CAREER

I took a management position at EBSCO Information Services, a multi-national corporation headquartered in Birmingham, AL, as consultant to their largest academic and public library customers across seven Southern states. I quickly learned that my success in the corporate world depended far more on forging trusting relationships than it did on any skills I had as a librarian.

The job paid me to be professionally credible, articulate, and approachable, strengths I was coming to recognize in myself. My confidence grew as I learned to host dinners in rooftop restaurants so elite that the menus didn't have prices on

them. I welcomed guests to extravagant receptions in penthouse restaurants in San Francisco, Dallas, Atlanta, and Chicago. I helped the sales team secure major accounts like Georgia Tech and the University of Miami. I was even pictured in the company's ads, so for a while, my picture traveled the world in library journals.

These were powerful experiences, both as a woman and as a professional. But not everything in this job was serious, and through it all, I learned how to hold my own as a woman in a male dominated culture. I learned to laugh at myself genuinely, rather than derisively. My best story from my EBSCO days happened in a donut shop in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. I was visiting a large community college. At the end of week, we liked to bring in donuts for the library staff. It was Friday before my colleague and I finally found a place to buy donuts in downtown Ft. Lauderdale. There were lots of pickup trucks in the parking lot, so we figured the donuts must be really good. My colleague dropped me at the door. I was startled when I walked in—there was a desk with a grumpy looking old man sitting at it. He kind of growled at me, "What do you want?" I couldn't imagine why he was out of sorts—I was dressed in a suit and heels, silk blouse buttoned up to the neck with a fabric flower pinned there, obviously a customer who could pay for a donut.

I answered him that I needed some donuts. He just pointed to a doorway behind me. As I turned to go through the doorway I could see counters lined with men drinking coffee and eating donuts. The place was packed. They were all staring towards me, so I glanced behind me. Standing there with a platter of donuts was a woman who was buck naked from the waist up. I immediately thought of the scene in the movie ET where Drew Barrymore and the extraterrestrial meet face to face and both raise their arms and start shrieking. I didn't shriek. I just burst out laughing. I could see the humor in the situation. I could also see that the real victim here was the woman holding the donuts, but I didn't know how to help her. So I backed out of the room, and turned back to the grumpy man. At that point I saw a huge painting mounted on the wall behind him—it was the Maja Nude painted on black velvet. Don't know how I missed it on the way in. The grumpy old man asks again, "what do you want?" So I said "I need some donuts for a library." The room behind me had remained quiet ever since I backed out, but when they heard the word "Library" they just burst out laughing. I could almost hear them saying, "She's a librarian!—Priceless!" Gamely, I asked him how much they were. I think he said a dollar a piece. So I left without any donuts. We ultimately found a Dunkin Donuts in the suburbs. I started to tell the lady at the counter my story, but when she turned around to take my order, I saw that every inch of her chest and arms was tattooed—this was 1989, long before tattoos became popular. I decided she might not see the humor in my story. The librarians loved it, though. And I heard many years later that the story was still making the rounds in South Florida!

For reasons both good and bad, working at EBSCO was an important step on the road to integration of my professional self and my personal self. After 4-1/2 years, I left that job. I was traveling too much and still had a son at home. I returned to academic libraries.

At this point, I became a library director for the first time. The U. of Montevallo is a small state-supported liberal arts university in rural Alabama, just south of Birmingham. At the interview, my self-doubt kicked in, to the point that I was so nervous I couldn't lift a cup of Diet Coke without it sloshing over the sides of the cup; I had to hold it with two hands to take a sip. It got easier later in the day when one of the deans asked me what I thought about the library building. I said it was the ugliest library I had ever seen (and by then, I had seen a lot of libraries!), at which time he jumped out of his chair and did a happy dance. Sure enough, I got the job.

I took over a very dysfunctional library with a very unhappy staff of twelve. The library had a dismal reputation on campus. I felt that everyone was waiting for a miracle—but I had not one clue where it would come from. I earnestly believed that God had led me to the right place, but I wondered where the joy would come from.

So I started with what I knew. I got people to talk to me and then to each other (even threatened to lock them in a room until they did). It was a tough going for a long time. Some staff refused to change. In the struggle, I learned new skills. To be....

Both patient and firm

Both encouraging and tough

Both receptive to input and commanding when needed

Trust grew, and we began to move forward.

I found I loved being the leader of an organization—I loved creating a productive and progressive environment where people thrived and the work was important and impactful. Eight years later, we had a reasonably functional staff, a good reputation on campus, and a beautifully renovated building paid for by EBSCO, my former employer!

One thing I learned in this job is that you never know what you are going to get when you have to confront people about their behavior in the workplace. I had a staff member at Montevallo, male, my age, and veteran of Vietnam with PTSD. He was smart and diligent, but was a bit brittle with students. That worsened in time, and he got to a point where all he could say, in answer to any question at all, was "No." He was clearly losing ground and I wasn't sure how to approach him about his behavior. HR gave me permission to talk to his wife. She insisted she didn't see any troubling behaviors. So I talked to my staff member in hope of finding out if he was aware of any changes himself. We sat down in my office, and I asked if he

was experiencing any problems. He leaned forward in total earnestness and said, "I'm impotent." That was the kind of moment no management seminar can prepare you for. Two utterly conflicting emotions hit you at once: poignancy and hilarity. I think I told him gently that I couldn't help him with that but perhaps there were other, work-related concerns I could help him with. It turned out he had early onset Alzheimer and he did leave our staff a little later.

During my eight years at Montevallo, I finally put to rest my sense of inadequacy as a woman. I dated a little, flirted a little, and ultimately came to grips with the fact that I was neither gorgeous nor ugly, just somewhere in the middle like most other humans. When I stopped worrying about what men thought of me, I became acutely aware for the very first time in my life how powerful and fulfilling the company of women can be. I finally realized that the friendship of smart, accomplished, fearless women would always sustain me, even if I never married again. I had always had good women friends, but that was a revelation to me.

Ten years after my divorce, I did remarry, this time wisely! My husband was supportive, and encouraged me to think about a new challenge, as I was running out of things to do at Montevallo.

There was a library in Kentucky that I had visited often for EBSCO. They had a built a beautiful addition that I saw years after I left EBSCO while in Kentucky for a board meeting. I remember leaving that library after a tour. It was late on a fall afternoon, and I turned back to look at the colors reflected in the glass of the entrance and said to my husband "wouldn't I be lucky to work in such a beautiful building." When the dean's job came open, I applied for the job as Dean of Libraries at Eastern Kentucky University.

You won't be surprised to hear that I was terrified when I interviewed. The University was 5 times the size of Montevallo and there were three libraries on the campus. I was expected to lead a staff of 70, far larger than the twelve I had had before. But I got the job.

Once again, I faced a deeply divided staff and a library with an awful reputation on the campus. Librarians had low morale—some of them had low-paying contracts for only 9 months a year with no compensation in the summer. Turnover was constant. This time, however, I knew what had to be done and I was pretty confident I could fix the broken culture. Some of my new colleagues responded well to my leadership and we began to reinvent the library from the inside out. I began to try and get salary increases for both faculty and staff.

EKU is not like GVSU. It lives on a starvation diet not unlike the people in Appalachia for whom the university exists. I was one of about six deans. The Provost and one other dean and I all came at the same time. We were immediately thrown into budget development. The new Provost had been given

\$125,000—that was all of the new money he was given. My Provost had come to EKU from Northern Michigan, and he was a UPer through and through, complete with entertaining stories and funny accents. Libraries were far from his first priority. So he asked we deans to turn in proposals for how to spend this new money. Then we met to choose the new initiatives together. I had gathered data and knew how terribly unfair the situation was with our faculty. When it came my time to speak, my voice broke and I said that I would not recruit another young professional to our staff until I could give them a 12 month contract with a living wage. The Provost wasn't too impressed, but my dean colleagues were, apparently, because they voted to give the library the entire amount. The Provost told me afterwards that it was "the damndest thing he had ever seen." To his credit, he honored the deans' wishes and I got new contracts for all of my faculty.

I came into my own professionally while I was at EKU. I was part of a national network of change-oriented librarians and was able to sit at tables where important conversations were taking place, satisfying the crusader in me.

I also came into my own as author of an annual review of journal pricing and was invited to Norway to speak about scholarly publishing reform (open access).

After six years, I moved to GVSU. This time, I wasn't terrified!!! I was really confident that I could do the work that was needed and that I would have a good time doing it. For the first time ever, I found myself at ease with a new challenge and certain that I was in the right place for the right reasons. Some of you probably know our story in the libraries:

We organized, laid down some expectations for a healthy culture, learned to be risk-takers, recruited new talent to join the old, and in 2012 won the highest recognition an academic library can achieve—ACRL's Excellence in Academic Libraries Award. The award is given based on how well the library supports the mission of its institution. We were the first non-research library to ever win it. That award may be the thing I am most proud of in the 45 years of my career.

In 2013, we opened the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons, and I now work in one of the most beautiful libraries in the county! Three years in, and we are still hosting visits and getting inquiries from libraries of all types across the US and around the world.

Let's go back to the beginning of this story for a moment. When I was that child growing up in Mobile, I thought I was supposed to grow up to be the model of Southern womanhood—elegant, soft-spoken, well-mannered, unfailingly gracious and a proponent of Southern culture as defined by those who could afford to live a certain way. That meant I was also supposed to be rich! And if I couldn't reach those lofty goals, I could at least learn how to be a Scarlet O'Hara, charming my way through life as a Southern belle who refuses to acknowledge that her dress is

made from old curtains. It took my living to the Midwest to finally let go of the last vestiges of that ideal.

Instead, in the years since I left the South, I have learned that women are actually supposed to grow up to be fully realized human beings who choose their **own** ideals of who they want to be, and who then spend a lifetime trying to become that person. I'm quite sure I'm not done with the work of becoming me yet. The church has disappointed me so completely that I struggle with matters of faith. I am still angry whenever I encounter cruelty and intolerance, which is about every day now. I don't like getting old, and I don't like the limitations it brings. And if the election goes poorly, I am going to have to start my life over in Canada.

As you have heard throughout this story, I have spent a lifetime figuring out how to be a woman in the workplace. Here are some things I believe to be true:

- I can nurture people simply by being interested and empathetic;
- I can protect my staff with a mother's passion;
- I can cry and still be seen as strong;
- I can argue with a man or a whole group of men and sometimes I win
- I can create and give birth to my own ideas, and I can be a midwife to other people's ideas;
- I can make mistakes and tell stories about them that cause people to laugh;
- I can ensure that men are treated fairly on my watch, just like women;
- I can believe in the power of love to change lives.

Grand Valley is the place where I have become whole. It welcomed me, accepted me as I am, and invited me to participate in the life of this amazing community. It trusted me with resources, believed in my vision, and showed appreciation every time my colleagues and I accomplished something important. The rest of my life will be better because I've spent the last eleven years of my life here, with all of you.