

Convocation Remarks
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From Denton to Douglass: Wearing the Past, Claiming the Future

Good morning. Thank you all for joining me today. What an honor to be gathered as one community in this lovely and inspiring chapel. You know, there is a wonderful little Yiddish proverb that attests to how often we humans fall far short of the Divine. It reads: "If God lived on earth, people would break his windows too."

Some of you may be wondering, given all of the construction surrounding this chapel, whether that Yiddish proverb has actually come true.

But, seriously, I am so pleased today to stand before you in Voorhees Chapel – for me it serves as a testimony and a reminder that there still are places of serene contemplation – and there are places where you can seek enlightenment beyond what we alone can teach or learn.

I'd like to take a few moments to thank the entire Alumnae Association, the staff of Douglass College, all of the facilities personnel, the Douglass College students, the Convocation Planning Committee, Anne Thomas, Joe Senceca, Holly Smith, Lauren LaRusso, Cheryl Wall, Linda Stamato, and the broader Rutgers Community. There is really no way to express my gratitude and heartfelt thanks to all of you and the efforts that you made on my behalf.

I'd be totally remiss if I didn't take one other moment to thank my spouse Din Ambar (could you stand for a moment). Of course many of you have now realized that my husband Din, has been Din Ambar for much longer than I have been Dean Ambar. And as you can imagine this is the source of much confusion and much chaos as we maneuver ourselves through this sea of "Deans" here at Rutgers. But I must say, from where I stand, he is the most significant "Dean" here today. When you take on a role like this, there have to be a few people, and at least one person, willing to get on the path of success with you (success is a journey – not a destination) – despite the difficulties, despite the challenge, despite whether they always agree – with a willingness to be supportive, sometimes take the lead, and make some sacrifices along the way. Din is that person for me. Those of you who know him, know that he really is brilliant. I will now say publicly that many of my good ideas come from Din. Of course he would say that all of my good ideas come from him. I love him and respect him tremendously, and I want to take this moment to publicly say that to him.

One of the other things that happens when you take on a role like this, the standard question that people ask you is "Are you settled in? Carmen, are you feeling settled?" Some of you may have been reading about all of the proposed changes to the broad higher education system in New Jersey. So the question of have you settled in has started to take on a whole new meaning. Well, I'm not sure that anyone is feeling particularly settled in but I feel welcomed. I feel completely a part of this community and that is a testament to all of the wonderful people here at Douglass and around Rutgers.

Now, since I've brought up the issue of the proposed changes, I think that it is appropriate for me to make some comments. However, I will not weigh in at this moment about the specifics of the proposal because I think there is actually a more important point to make here. That is that we have some core, fundamental functions that not only have to happen here at Douglass (and at Rutgers in general) but they have to be advanced. We have to be about the business of teaching and educating (for us young women), we have to be about the business of ensuring that there are viable leadership opportunities, that they are successfully moving through our academic programs, and that they are gaining all of the fundamental skills that they need to enter as full

fledge players in this new global community. So there will be opportunities for us to weigh in, advocate for our position, to express our views at these macro levels. I am of the belief that we will be successful in establishing our continual relevance, our viability, and our unique contributions to Rutgers and to the state of New Jersey. So I want you to be assured today that we are about the business of shoring up and advancing our fundamental programs here at Douglass; we are about the business of establishing and defining our next step with our eyes toward excellence. I'm here to tell you that from *that* perspective I'm settled in.

I am very proud to stand before you as the ninth dean of Douglass College. For the College and myself this is not a point of culmination, but one I hope of reinvigoration and reexamination – and one of change. Remember that with change comes opportunity. Hopefully, today, I can add a word about how special this college is, about its rich traditions, and therefore about its rich future. As I reflect upon my own personal journey, I cannot help but recognize the almost genetic pull of Douglass College, and what it represents. I am literally clothed today in a tradition and philosophy that as a child I saw embodied in the life of my mother.

If this gown, this academic robe, looks a little worn, it's my mother's. Today, I am wearing the robe of Dr. Gwendolyn Brown Twillie. My mother earned her doctorate in dance and related arts. She attended women's college in Denton, Texas. As I look back on her days as a student, I marvel at how radical and powerful a statement her own education was. I really want to paint the picture for you. She was attending Texas Women's University and she was in residency there, about 6 hours from home. My father, Manuel Twillie, and my grandmother, Earline Brown, remained home raising my older brother David (12 at the time) and younger brother Mat (four), and me (seven), back in Little Rock, Arkansas. Away from her family, pursuing her PhD. My mother taught me that motherhood, matrimony and a life of the mind are not mutually exclusive. And my father, a devout and extraordinarily wise man, taught me that fatherhood and masculinity could reside in a man that saw his wife's intellectual and professional development as foundational to the success of his family.

These were powerful lessons for me. My parents come from very, very small towns. It can be said of both Searcy and Colt, Arkansas: "There ain't nothing really near those towns." Yet, this couple raised a doctor, a teacher, and now your dean. In their world – a world where Brown v. Board of Education was down the street – indeed, my home church where I was married is literally across the street from Little Rock Central High School – these two people saw beyond the limits imposed by society.

At a time when being black meant serving as a preacher or undertaker and little more, my father served as a beloved high school principal. For me, he was a one-man civil rights movement. But I lived every day with Manuel Twillie. My generation of women did not know the women's movement intimately. But I lived under the tutelage of Gwendolyn Twillie every day. My mother was the women's movement for me. Together, my parents painted a vision for my brothers and me of possibilities, in a faith-filled home. So yes, I have some academic training, and maybe I've had some career accomplishments, but the real reason I'm here at Douglass today is because of these two people.

Would you please help me recognize my parents who are here today, Mr. Manuel and Dr. Gwendolyn Twillie? So today, in a sense, it is very natural for me to stand before you. I'm not an alumna of Douglass College, that much is true, but I am in the Douglass tradition. And as I look out at this great gathering, I cannot help but feel that I profoundly understand the Douglass difference.

Each of Douglass' deans before me struggled to advance and protect the idea of women's education and the power of women's colleges. I do not plan to make that case today, although the lawyer in me would love to do so (and feels confident that I could). Rather than defend the station of women's education per se, I think it is timely to reflect upon where we stand and where we once stood as a college within a global community.

In 1918, when Mabel Smith Douglass led the Women's College of New Jersey, it was evident that not only had the world *changed* it had *disappeared*. It was a year and time of exchanges – some with horrible consequences, others with infinite possibilities.

In 1918 we exchanged War for Peace, Isolationism for Interdependence, and our Horses, for the horseless carriage. In 1918 we realized we exchanged *Terra Firma* for the Era of Flight. In many ways, we exchanged the 19th for the 20th century. And in these exchanges and transformations we were wed for a time to great uncertainty. A best seller of 1918 was Blasco-Ibanez's "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." We wondered amidst the charred ruins of the Great War exactly what new world we had wrought.

What we *had* wrought included unseemly innovations from the human character. These included trench warfare, biological and chemical war, and the foreshadowing of genocide on an unprecedented scale.

And in all of this, we wrought the world we live in today. Hannah Arendt warned us of this world in 1958. She wrote, "The question is not so much whether we are the masters or the slaves of our machines, but whether machines still serve the world and its things, or if, on the contrary, they and the automatic motion of their processes have begun to rule and even destroy worlds and things."

As Douglass College was born with a new world in 1918, so it, and we, the stewards of its legacy, must be reborn even now. As Munich, Warsaw and Soweto proved to be products of global leadership gone silent, so must we ensure that Karachi, Beijing and even Washington, be perpetually reminded that leadership and the democratic impulse that beats around the globe is fostered through temperance, inclusion and a wisdom that seeks to unite when possible, and challenge when necessary.

In this way, Douglass College must be about the *character* of women's leadership, as much as it is about its importance and expansion. In short, the struggles of the new global era ushered in post-1918 called for a leadership from every segment of the human family. And even as women in America could not vote in 1918, Douglass College embarked on its mission to develop the minds and character of young women who one day would. This mission has spanned an era of Wilsons, Roosevelts and Bushes. But it has also spanned one filled with Eleanors, Madeleines, and Condoleezas. There is no question that the status of women's leadership has grown, even as we have grown. May we ever be reminded that our mission statement; "Where Women Learn to Lead," is as much about *who we are* as much as it is about what we teach. The world has been painfully reminded that where women are limited, development is limited. Where women cannot lead, nations cannot advance. To curtail the progress of women is to drive with one arm behind our backs and with the other adjusting a foggy rear-view mirror.

I would offer that at Douglass College, here in New Jersey – among the most ethnically, culturally and economically diverse states in the nation, and here, on this great campus, alive with research and brimming with possibilities – we are in many respects training, teaching and *shaping the lives* of women for the sake of democracy and human progress here at home and around the world. What we offer is a special kind of training, a special kind of education. I would offer, in all humility, that we are no less relevant today, but in fact, more relevant than we even dare to know. For those who suggest our enterprise is passé, I would offer that as long as the democratic enterprise is worth preserving, as long as open societies dedicated to the full potential of its citizens are valued, than our mission will last in perpetuity.

With this in mind, today I am not only wearing my mother's robe, but of those at Douglass that came before me. I wear the robe of Barbara A. Shailor who expanded and strengthened our partnerships with corporations and also forged our collaboration with Ewha Women's University in Korea.

I wear the robe of Mary S. Hartman who among many things guided the development of the Douglass Project, PLEN, and the Laurie Chair in Women's Studies -- really, many of the unique and special programs that are the Douglass Difference today.

I wear the robe of Jewel Plummer Cobb who had the wisdom to establish a strong recruitment program attracting the best students.

I wear the robe of Margery Somers Foster (who was kind enough to visit me the other day; she is in her 80s but still going strong) who understood and supported access to higher education for women of diverse and disadvantaged economic and educational backgrounds. She was Dean when the EOF program was founded.

I wear the robe of Ruth Marie Adams. Dean Adams oversaw the major expansion of the campus and reiterated the College's commitment to high scholarship among its best students.

I wear the robe of Mary Ingraham Bunting who established the Bunting Program, the first program in the country for returning nontraditional aged women students, a program that is still going strong today.

Today, I wear the robe of Margaret Trumbull Corwin who really shepherded the college through the depression years. And she established the solid foundation of a liberal arts curriculum with the flexibility of professional courses of study and welcomed a more diverse student body.

And today, I very proudly wear the robe of Mabel Smith Douglass. She began with the belief and commitment that young women, particularly the young women of New Jersey, should have the opportunity for a college education. As the namesake of our institution, her achievement is self-evident.

What robes will we bequeath to those future generations of Douglass women? Down what corridors will they walk and, what lessons will we impart?

Our expectation is that we will work diligently to continue to attract the very best students and that we will take a permanent place in the arena of excellence – as our institution is known as a first-choice institution.

Most every Douglass alumna from the not-too-distant past has commented to me about the long white gloves they wore on special occasions. They want me to understand how different the times were. All I can say is that there is a season for everything. It is our goal that this and the future generations of Douglass women will speak of different sorts of gloves and hands. Let them be the surgical gloves they earned from an early training in the sciences. Let them be protective gloves for humane and important lab work. Let them be athletic gloves to protect against calluses as they hone their skills on the playing field. Let them be the proverbial gloves that sometimes must come off when in a legal battle. I say, let's continue this marvelous tradition with the gloves appropriate for advancement in a hi-tech, post-industrial, democratic society.

Our expectation is that our impact on women in non-traditional fields will continue to be groundbreaking and award winning as we provide the nurturing environment for women to pursue science, engineering, computer technology and many other fields. This work will be expanded to include all four years of a young woman's academic career.

Our expectation is that we will be at the forefront of what it means for students to be a part of a residential learning community, and that academic work being explored in the classroom can and should be expanded into the learning environments of our residence halls.

Our belief is that Douglass is where women learn to lead. Our belief is that Douglass is where women learn to lead *now*. Our belief is that Douglass is where women learn to lead now, in this

new global environment, and we will expand and develop programs that will give young women the fundamental skills they need to take on leadership on the global stage. As we embark upon these goals, we will remain in the Douglass tradition but with an eye towards the type of change that means we have reached the next level of accomplishment and sustained excellence.

We, of course, will need you in these endeavors. We will need your guidance, we will need your support, we will need your patience, we will need your understanding, and frankly, we will need your generosity.

As the French poet Paul Valery wrote: "Long years must pass before the truths we have made for ourselves become our very flesh."

This is truly an exciting moment to be involved in women's education. It is truly an exciting moment to be involved in women's education in New Jersey. It is a time for each of us to make robes of our own, so that the "flesh of truth" as Valery suggested, advance not into tomorrow naked and cold, but rather advances into tomorrow warm, invigorated and bold.

I am humbly inspired and dedicated to this mission and I thank you all for this opportunity to be a part of it.