President’s Inauguration Address

May 1, 2015

Congregation Rodeph Shalom
Introduction

Since we are in a house of worship, it is only fitting that I give thanks to the man upstairs who has blessed me with this incredible outpouring of love from family, friends and colleagues from around the state and region. It is a true testament to his power and love to which I give all honor and praise. I am incredibly humbled and deeply touched.

Dignitaries, Delegates, Board of Trustees

I’d like to thank everyone for taking the time to be here this morning. First I’d like to acknowledge the many dignitaries — most of whom need no introduction. I’d like to recognize and thank all of the delegates, and I’d like to recognize and give a special thanks to the members of our Foundation and; finally, I’d like to recognize and give a special thanks to our Board of Trustees. These are people who volunteer their time and work incredibly hard on behalf of our students and they deserve a special thanks. There are far too many people of importance and far too little time to acknowledge everyone whose involvement in my life has made it possible for me to be standing before you this morning — but to you all who have played a role in my life, thank you.

Family

To family and friends this day is your day too. I begin with someone who is no longer here but is never too far from my heart; her spirit lives in me and continues to inspire — of course that is my dearly missed mother Mrs. Thelma Generals. Next week is Mother’s Day; and so I know she’s looking down on this occasion with pride and the satisfaction that there could be no better Mother’s Day present (perhaps she’ll forgive me for the toaster ovens I use to show up with at the various holidays). And of course the person who is here and whose presence and strength continue to inspire and guide our family, my father, Donald Generals Sr. I would be remiss if I did not ask Ms. Alice who has been my Dad’s companion and therefore is now a part of our very tightly knit family to also take a bow. Brother, Sisters, and Kids...And
Celebrated History

The presidential inauguration marks the beginning of new leadership in the context of a celebrated history, institutional traditions, and a vision for the future. As I assume the leadership and responsibilities associated with guiding our College, I do so with the full understanding that this great Institution is the result of the incredible work and talent of so many dedicated faculty and staff…many of whom have served almost as long as the college has existed. This day is for you as well. No College can thrive without the dedication, the independence of thought and hard work of a great faculty. Symbolizing the continuity between the 6 presidents, I would like to ask those who have served for 30 years or more to please stand and take a much deserved bow. Similarly, the men and women in our administration and staff and classified members whose job it is to make sure students are properly registered and supported, and classrooms are ready for learning and our campus grounds are fit and secure also deserve to be recognized. So if you’ve worked as an administrator, classified or support staff member for 30 years or more — again, symbolizing the continuity between leadership — please stand and take a bow. These fine men and women have served every president. For those of you who’ve been here for less than 30 years, by CCP standards, you’re generally viewed as a newcomer. So at the next inauguration, 30 years from now, you will get your chance to stand. There is one person who rightly deserves to be singled out for her dedication to every president that has led this institution. And of course that person is my Executive Assistant, Ms. Josie Digregorio. Josie, please take a bow. Thanks to those who worked on putting the program together and thanks to Lynette Brown-Sow.
Graduates

We have graduated over 54,000 students since 1965. Most would not have been given the opportunity to acquire a higher education degree or certificate. Many never considered college right out of high school and still many more experienced their first formal education with CCP. We have a legacy of many students beginning at the remedial level or ESL and continuing their studies through the doctorate degree, many more are lawyers, our fire and police departments are filled with graduates from CCP, including — I might add, our current fire commissioner, Mr. Derrick Sawyer and, as everyone now knows, the current White House Social Secretary, Ms. Deesha Dyer, is a graduate of CCP. In a City known for its Eds and Meds we proudly proclaim a sizable share of the health care practitioners including many of the nurses that have served you, many digital imaging professionals and most dental hygienists — to name a few. If you’ve had your car repaired in Philadelphia or the surrounding area, it’s a good chance that car was repaired by a graduate of CCP. If you’ve had a meal in a fine restaurant in or around the City, it’s very likely that meal was prepared by a CCP student. I could go on. But here’s the real point, beyond our most celebrated graduates, there are thousands who have learned the lessons of civility, who have studied and embraced the core values of our humanities, and used their talents of critical inquiry to examine the problems in their communities resulting in healthier neighborhoods. We’ve made great citizens; we've made responsible parents and we've made Philadelphia one of the best places in the world to visit, and one of the best places to live. The City is in the throes of a massive renaissance in part because of the education CCP has provided over the course of 50 years However, that renaissance promises to come to a screeching halt unless we find ways to include those who are stuck among the 28% who continue to wallow in poverty and despair. More on that in a minute.
History: Democracy and Education

This occasion has special meaning because of the historical ties between the College, the City of Philadelphia, the birth of our democratic principles and the role education must play for us to become a more perfect union. Mere blocks from where we sit, the founders were able to weave into an endearing set of values those guiding principles that have served as a basis to the laws of this land and the aspirations we seek: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Although our Constitution does not mention education as a fundamental right, the architects clearly understood the importance of education to the success of their grand experiment in creating a government for and by the people. Thomas Jefferson’s “Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge” and his creation of the University of Virginia are two small examples of his educational philosophy. Although, any reference to his contribution always deserves a footnote due to his many personal, social and philosophical contradictions. Then again, TJ wasn’t a Philadelphian. Nevertheless, we can’t dismiss his role in creating the language of democracy just blocks away. On the other hand, Ben Franklin’s axiom that “the only thing more expensive than education is ignorance…” has haunted this nation which continues to pay more to send a man to prison than to educate that man.” Nearly 115 years later — even after the bloodiest war in this Nation’s history, a war in which Philadelphia’s role is memorialized throughout the City and recognized in the Stately Union League, WEB Dubois’ seminal study on the Philadelphia Negro asserts that the problems of the Negro was rooted in the lack of education and not in any of the obvious symptoms: poverty, family dysfunction, crime…Again, articulating — in Philadelphia — the nexus between, education, democracy and freedom — a concept embedded in the DNA of our City and part of the rich heritage we celebrate today.

CCP’s legacy, and thus its future, grows out of Philadelphia’s rich history as the midwife to American democracy. In 1965, in the middle of the Civil Rights movement Congressman John Lewis reminded the nation that until such time that all citizens and residents are free from the shackles of ignorance
and poverty the Revolution of 1776 is not complete. Responding to the logic of that maxim, the City leaders created Community College of Philadelphia. It is not a coincidence that Community College of Philadelphia celebrates its 50th anniversary at the same time that the Civil Rights movement celebrates its 50th anniversary. The modern community college grew out of this period of social disruption and as we celebrate our 50th anniversary, and the passing of the presidential torch we cannot lose site, nor will I allow us to lose sight, of the relationship between the purpose and goals of this institution and the unfinished business of the Civil Rights movement. Affirming this edict, according to the Philadelphia City Council’s 1962 Commission on Higher Education, “It is in connection with our social goals that the future of the community college should be discussed. In a very real sense, this institution constitutes the latest embodiment of our democratic educational philosophy…the College is being developed to meet certain well defined social, economic and educational demands”.

My Story

Many of you have heard my story, but for those of you who have not, I think a proper context is needed to understand what motivates my vision for leading this great institution. I have spent the last 31 years of my life in higher education. I received the doctorate of education from Rutgers University under the tutelage and guidance of my friend, teacher and colleague Dr. Dan Tanner. Dr. Tanner, please take a bow. Dr. Tanner saw in me what others did not and it was his willingness to go to battle for me that has made all the difference in the world in my being here today. So I guess now is as good a time as ever to say thank you. Even though you were not always that kind in some of the comments you wrote on my papers. It took more than a few nights at the local pub after class with my classmates talking me down to understand that you were pushing me to heights that I had yet to realize for myself. So again, thank you.

My direct path to the presidency began 31 years ago as a PT Tutor at Passaic County Community College. I knew that I had the makings of a
career in higher education when my salary increased from $4.00 an hour to $4.25. As a tutor, you are as close as it is possible to witnessing the fundamentals of teaching and learning. You are a witness to that very moment when the proverbial light bulb goes off and learning occurs. I could see how the right stimulus could prompt the thinking process and lead the learner to a proper response. Those early days in the tutoring lab at Passaic County Community College had a transformative effect on my personal and professional outlook. Beyond witnessing the learning process, I realized there were individuals who, for whatever the reasons, were denied the basics of an education and thus found themselves in a position of desperation and for all intents and purposes were denied the basic human rights and privileges promised by our nation. This to me was an issue of social justice. These were individuals who had dreams like you and me. They were wise beyond their years because of the lives they lived and the children they were raising and the families they supported. They had what we now refer to in educational parlance as grit. Most of the students endured many setbacks, overcame incredible obstacles and, for the most part had very little hope for achieving a college degree. But they persevered and they graduated. Many of them went to work, many continued on to higher levels. Until this day, those former students continue to approach me in train stations or restaurants to thank me for the joy of learning and for helping them to find the path of possibilities to the lives they now enjoy. As an educator there is no greater joy or blessing for the work we do. But understanding their struggles is an important part of my life and an important aspect to what we do. My own story, in many ways, is consistent with the lives of our students and thus helps me to understand.

Prior to my years as an educator, I worked for a number of years as a chemical operator in a large chemical factory in Paterson NJ. Not quite the typical beginning for a college president. We rather derisively referred to it as a “chemical plantation.” My ability to understand the lives of our students and the challenges they must overcome is shaped — in many ways — by those experiences. Like many of our students, I went to college right out of high school. But due to the vicissitudes of life, (one of which is sitting up here on
the stage), I decided I needed to secure full-time employment. Like many of our students, I had to make a life decision about staying in school, or not. My decision was to do both — which is precisely what I tell my students when they threaten to quit. Keep your toe in the water; take a Saturday morning class; go during the evening hours; or now, take an online class. But don’t give up. I often refer to my chemical factory days as my first graduate degree. First of all, I could see quite clearly what life had in store for me if I did not get an education. And Second, I was able to see how social class and human worth are defined by money, power, race, culture and yes, education. It was the classic Dickensian experience. My co-workers were part of the massive migration of poor Blacks described by Isabella Wilkerson in her epic novel the Warmth of Other Suns. They and their families came north in search of economic freedom and to escape what was still a Jim Crow South, only to find themselves trapped in the industrial exploitation of the 50s, 60s and 70s. This was pre Civil Rights Legislation, Pre-environmental protection laws and pre worker rights and protection laws. Similar to the way that the unnamed narrator in Ralph Ellison’s 20th Century classic the Invisible Man, was able to hide his true identity to fit in with the groups that served his racial or political interests, I too was able to hide or disguise my identity to fit in as a matter of convenience. I had the equivalent of a 2 year college degree; and I came from a very middle class family – not quite the picket fence type, but pretty close. These were not the qualities you bragged about in an environment such as the chemical factory. I could see how little respect the supervisors had for the workers. Rather than seeing them as men supporting their families, they saw them as laborers who punched a time clock; they saw them as uneducated extensions to the machines they were operating; they saw them as inferior beings. On the other side, even though I was able to discern their humanity, I did see a lot of behaviors that reinforced many of the stereotypes held by the supervisors. Someone who was educated and dared to read anything other than the sports pages was looked at suspiciously by the workers. So I had to do what was necessary to fit in… I often tried to inspire some of those who were closer in age to myself to think of a future beyond the chemical plant, but for them, it was a job and any thought of additional education or training was an attempt by me to impose my values on them. Despite the flaws, I saw men
whose lives were dedicated to their families; and I saw men who had the highest hopes for the future; not theirs, but their children, their community, their race and their culture. I realized that for many of them, I was their inspiration as they were able to see through me a vision of their own hopes and aspirations. And so in the time since, I have not forgotten. I may have forgotten their names, but I have not forgotten the hope that they placed in me to make our future a better place. In fact, my moral compass is deeply rooted in those experiences from Morton Chemical. I learned to never look down; never look down on the adult whose reading skills were barely above that of a 6 grader; never look down on the 30 year old who had been incarcerated for 10 years and was now counting on me to help them salvage the rest of their life; never look down on the single young mother of 5 children who bounced from one low paying job to the next so she could feed her children while taking nursing classes at night in an effort to provide a better life, never look down on that woman no matter how many times she’s failed elementary algebra; never look down on the immigrant who came here in search of a better life, struggled to learn a second language who struggled to convince her husband that education was something a woman could and should pursue; my moral compass inspires me to — give them hope; inspires me to find ways to lift them up; to help them to find their strengths and to find the way forward. I believe the following strategies will get us there.

Recommit to Access and Opportunity

Recommit to Access and Opportunity — Access and opportunity are the pillars of what we do and must be preserved at all costs. Current discussions about success should not supplant what I consider the sacred cow of community college institutions. In my travels, I have heard the whispers about the need to become more selective by suppressing access. I categorically refute any suggestion that we need to close the doors of access. Instead, we should:

– Transform Developmental Education
- Provide holistic Assessment (cognitive and affective), innovative curriculum, Technology, academic support & advisement (guided pathways)
- Increase and Strengthen our K-12 Partnerships
- Foster Enlightened Citizenry — Political engagement, social and economic power and justice are derived from an enlightened citizen. I don’t believe it to be a coincidence that the most oppressive societies are those who would deny half their population a right to education.
- Expand and Strengthen Workforce Development Initiatives:
  The need to provide a trained and work-ready workforce has reached epidemic proportions. According to the BLS there are nearly 5 million available jobs — nationwide — to be filled by those with a post-secondary degree or credential. These jobs will require some level of higher education and training. Jobs that were available to those with a high school diploma are rare, pay very little and, quite frankly, are fading fast. Today’s in-demand jobs in the manufacturing, service and health-care sectors require education and training in a variety of STEM related disciplines (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and; almost all jobs require good communication skills, problem solving abilities and an aptitude for functioning and succeeding in a work environment. The idea that preparing a student for citizenship can only happen through the humanities or the liberal arts, is a non sequitur. In a speech to the College Board in 2011, Robert Zimmerman, the president of the University of Chicago, gave a speech entitled “…The Liberal Arts in an Emergent World…” He discussed the importance of a liberal education in a changing world of work during a complex time in human history. The idea of teaching a student in a career focused curriculum to be a liberal thinker capable of multiple modes of inquiry in varied contexts is as important as teaching the specialized skill. According to Zimmerman, “…most jobs involve a person contributing to an endeavor involving more than the individual...so that when an individual takes a job, they are entering into a way of contributing to some endeavor and through
that to society as a whole...work is a noble activity and, as educators, there is nothing wrong with helping students prepare themselves for the world of work...” In fact, he goes on to say that “…those of us in the liberal arts institutions should...embrace this as a valuable activity...” Enabling students to live a fuller life and enabling them to be good citizens are very important aspects of what we do...but so too is the role of preparing them for entering the world of meaningful work...”. The two are not mutually exclusive...

Social Justice — In the last few days, I decided to change the ending of my speech. A couple of days ago we had a Town Hall meeting and I stated that I could not in good faith come to work every day as a college president, and not voice my concern for the plight of young black men in our inner cities...You've all seen the screaming headlines from the New York Times where 1.5 million black men have disappeared from their communities, from their families, from their neighborhoods. I'm not going to give a speech on police brutality (I believe that’s a symptom...not the cause); I'm not going to give a speech on prison reform or pay equity...while I do believe these are significant factors that must be dealt with, I believe they too are symptoms of a larger cause. I believe we must get back to those roots that were articulated in this great city many years ago and not too far away. We must create a culture of civility based on the belief that all men and women are created equal. Yes, black lives matter, but so do brown lives matter and so do white lives matter, and so do the lives of the men and women in blue who protect us in our neighborhoods every day; their lives matter...Our brothers and sisters in the LGBTQ community, their lives matter...We are all created equal and those of us who work and teach in the Community College of Philadelphia I’m asking you to embrace these principles and to help me and our community partners to lead this city to greatness by paving a way for those 28% of our brothers and sisters who continue to live in poverty and are hoping and seeking a way out...I’m asking you to embrace the idea that what we do is a matter of social justice...I’m asking you to join in making the Community College of Philadelphia the # 1 College in the land...

God Bless Community College of Philadelphia,
God Bless the City of Brotherly Love & Sisterly affection
God Bless our faculty and staff,
God Bless our wonderful, wonderful students….Thank you.

Watch the video of the inauguration of Dr. Donald Generals.