

Succeeding Against the Odds Is Not Enough

An address to Chi Alpha Epsilon Inductees

State University of New York at New Paltz

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Recently, I sat at a table in the SUB with Rita Little and a student named Ozzie Abreu. Ozzie is not an EOP student. He is a very fortunate young man that has been adopted by Rita. While I was indulging in my tuna fish sandwich Rita was telling me how much she missed direct contact with her students since her elevation to an important new position. The one thing that Rita said that stuck in my mind after lunch was, “My students have succeeded against the odds.”

Her statement is the basis of my short talk, “Succeeding Against the Odds Is not Enough.”

Rita’s straightforward acknowledgement brought back memories to this gray beard standing in front of you on this wonderful, gratifying occasion. And it is a wonderful occasion, not just because you very gifted students are being inducted into Chi Alpha Epsilon, but also because of the fact that you are here at all. And that you are thriving.

It wasn’t always this way on this lovely, energetic campus. When I came to New Paltz in 1967, I was just a scant few years older than most of the students in this room. I came here from teaching at predominantly black Howard University in Washington, DC. After I accepted my New Paltz appointment as an assistant professor, I realized that I was in a sea of whiteness, a campus nearly devoid of students from New York City.

The only people that looked like me were Dr. Marjorie Butler of Education Psychology and professors Benjamin Wigfall in Fine Arts and George Roberts in African Studies. The rest were a cadre of students from Somalia, East Africa and a handful of black students from Long Island and Queens. That was it! Forget about Harlem, the Bronx or Brooklyn.

Well after a few months on campus teaching and coaching, I took my good friend, Dr Thomas Monterio's advice. He told me after he learned that I took this job, "Don't just go up there as a man. Go up there as a Black man." Dr. Thomas Monteiro was an urban revolutionary in New York City and the 1960s were revolutionary times. His directive to me was multi-faceted with serious implications. What he was saying was, I was not to melt quietly into my new environment, but rather to hold on to my intrinsic values and be vigorous in the struggle to open doors for the excluded.

So I got my black self involved with campus liberals, who thought like I did, that New Paltz needed some color amongst its student body.

I didn't know what I was getting myself into at the time – and I will spare you the complex details – but I will tell you that we embarked on an effort to change New Paltz from its all-white heritage to become a college that offered opportunity also to urban students-of-color.

This effort, as you might expect, was met with tepid acceptance and fairly strident resistance not only from a director of admissions who refused to admit the first class of EOP students, then called Project A, to faculty who thought that we were dumbing-down the student body to the Long Island guidance community, who were perplexed that we

were denying some of their “good students” in favor of admitting “unqualified” minority students.

Many things happened along the way, but we persevered and succeeded in establishing EOP and MRP as bonafide admission and retention programs. I was fortunate enough, before the age of thirty, to be a part of this substantial experiment in higher education that has endured and prospered to this very day. The inductees gathered here today are the beneficiaries of those demanding times.

Those first twenty black and Puerto Rican courageous students that came here in 1968 and succeeded beyond most expectations, from an educational perspective, are your academic forefathers and foremothers. They walked many of the same sidewalks that you walk everyday and as they fought the fight for full inclusion, they remained steadfastly committed to survival and making New Paltz a more welcoming place for those students who were to follow.

There are too many success stories to tell that emanate from those difficult times, but I will mention Dr. Tomas Morales, now president of CUNY’s College at Staten Island, Robert “Raheim” Jackson, a New York City councilman, who sued NYS and won, to improve school funding in NYC, Dr. Sandra “Sam” Miller-Holdst the current dean of students at Dutchess CCC and Ron Law, a current member of the College Foundation, who used his governmental influence to help President Poskanzer obtain needed signage for the campus.

I mention these four because, not only because they were EOP pioneers, who succeed academically and graduated from SUNY New Paltz. I mention them because

they became change agents in society and have never forgotten that there is still work to be done.

While on campus, these students working with their peers, were a force behind the establishment of Black Studies and Latin American Studies. They established and wrote for the *Hermanos Latinos* and *Fahari* newspapers. They founded the Voices of Unity, the Black Student Union and Museo Escolar. Their collective efforts have helped to make SUNY New Paltz the ethnically rich campus that it is today.

The monumental achievement of diversifying New Paltz, begun in 1967, continues to pay big dividends today. One of the primary considerations of high school seniors that want to come to New Paltz is its diverse student body. New Paltz is still a unique campus within the SUNY system. Your experience here is something to be valued. I promise you that it will go far in preparing you for your fast approaching life as professionals. New Paltz has certainly done that for me!

I am quite honored to think that the university where I established my career and that enabled me to support my family, still values me as a person worthy to address a contingent of its brightest students. I don't accept this honor lightly. Being given this opportunity is a joy and I will remember this day as a mile stone.

Why am I spending my time here on stage talking about the past instead of lauding the academic prowess of you, the inductees to Chi Alpha Epsilon? To be sure your accomplishments and your great potential for future successes are worthy of praise.

One of my reasons for speaking of the past is to make you aware that life as an EOP student, as poet Langston Hughes says, "Ain't always been no crystal stairs." But

more importantly, my reason for discussing the past is because, Now it's your turn! You must become knowledgeable of the past so that you can move effectively into the future.

We, America, needs you and your brightness and intelligence to solve the problems that my generation hasn't been able to solve: failing urban education, throwaway black and Latino males that fill our prisons, disparity in academic achievement, reestablishment of functional families, changing mindsets of the young, transforming communities, combating poverty, increasing the minority college-going population. And so much more. The list is long and deep.

Are you up to the task? How many Michelle Obamas are here in this audience? Will you, like she, be willing to associate with those still left on the lower rung of society's ladder. Or will you volunteer your time in schools encouraging children to do their best. Will you use your New Paltz education to the benefit of others as well as yourselves? These are engaging questions that only you can answer.

An emerging America is becoming more brown and black everyday, but the societal problems persist and our country needs you to do more than be successful against the odds. It needs you to balance your life between family, work and advocacy.

It needs you to be Godmothers and Godfathers to others making their way through the morass of the educational system. It needs you to be like Rita Little. Ozzie Abreu one day, I'm certain, will repay Rita by following her example of commitment, self-sacrifice and agape love.

I've devoted my life to working for the advancement of young people and I encourage you to do some the same... each in your own way.

The village raising a child is a great social concept, but to me a more realistic or practical approach is “each one-reach one.” If each one of you will do that the world will be a better place to live and raise your family and maybe there will be: one less young lady that gives herself to pregnancy before her time; one less young man who takes to the street and abandon higher education; and one more middle school student who dreams of going to college are kindled and will become motivated do what is necessary to achieve that goal.

There will be numerous opportunities for involvement that present themselves to you in the coming years. If you accept at least one of these opportunities, you can continue to accomplish what we old-school fundamentalists, who are slowly passing off of the scene, started during our time at the helm. I have confidence that most of you will not shy away from the difficult and challenging and that you will do the right thing.

As the Educational Opportunity Program recognizes your academic success, promotes continued high academic standards, fosters communication among your membership and honors your academic excellence, my hope and dream is that your personal success will go hand in hand with the contributions that you make to society as a whole. In these financially tough times one has to think of self first, but my encouragement to you is to stop every now and then to reach back and bring somebody along with you.

I will close with a poem written after watching an episode of the old television show, “Fame.” It’s about a black young lady who is told by a white teacher that she can’t

be a ballerina because she doesn't fit the physical profile. She is too curvy in all the wrong places!

Read the poem

If I were to add to the poem, it would depict that undaunted young lady graduating from Alvin Ailey Dance School and opening a school of her own in the South Bronx, Harlem or Bed Stuy, opening doors for others like herself. So, I leave you with this reality:

It's your turn now! I ask only that you make the best of it.

Thank you.