

# **MSCW**

Wolfe Lecture

April 6, 2016  
Columbus Mississippi

**In all of our lives we live in moments that turn to days that make weeks then months of dawns of hope and sunsets of despair, living amidst the sunlight of victories and the grey skies of discontent.**

**But the moments that will one day matter when we look over the shoulders of our past are those when we conquered our fears, stood our ground, sacrificed for someone we love and stood up for the rights of a perfect stranger because it was the right and righteous thing to do.**

**Today, it seems that we live in an America where the past defines our future rather than in an America that looks forward and fosters dreams of what we can become. But for all the tomorrows of our American Democracy let us stand to proclaim that when we say “All Men Are Created Equal” it means something, protects something and encourages us to believe that the diversity among us should have nothing to do with equality and everything to do with strength of character and country.**

**For it is in honor of the sacrifice of others and in better hopes of a more just America that we must declare that our nation is at its best when she embraces all of us, protects the least of us and offers her bounty of hope and prosperity to not just some of us.**

**And in the name of the women we honor today and in gratitude to all those who walked along the blacktopped roads of Mississippi and Alabama in the 1960's, let us stand up rather than stand by to the call for justice in our lifetimes.**

**Let each of us accept the challenge to stand shoulder to shoulder rather than looking over our shoulder at the past.**

**And may all of us carry the burdens of injustice for those who cannot walk.**

**For, it is in the circle of brotherhood and understanding that America has and can celebrate its finest moments.**

**That is the story of Diane Hardy, Barbara Turner, Laverne Green, Jaqueline Edwards, Mary Flowers, Eula Mae Houser and all who would follow in their footsteps.**

**And that was the missed opportunity for the men and women here in Columbus Mississippi and in Montgomery, Alabama who abandoned grace and morality in order to repudiate the promise and the purpose of:**

**“We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”**

**But today, as we honor these women of courage and all those that stood with them, let us be reminded that honoring them today, cannot relieve us of our own personal obligation to live in the present and work each day for the promise of a more just America where life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is not just something to dream of, it is something to live in.**

**And let us be constantly vigilant to the character of nobility that lies in hearts of all of us, so that we can see others, feel others and celebrate others for who they are and who they can become.**

**In the American South of the 1960's and in our 21<sup>st</sup> Century America of today there are those who believe there is gallantry in wrong doing as long as there is an Army following behind you and it is easy to be self-righteous when those that matter stand by your side. But then there are those of us who will always stand up to proclaim that America is at her best when she embraces all of us, protects the least of us and offers her bounty of hope and prosperity to not just some of us.**

**Let us be constantly reminded that we can neither afford nor should we be required to live in the past. For there is no better time than now for a true American Patriot to stand up for the rights of others and proclaim that the diversity among us is what HAS made and will ALWAYS make America a greater nation.**

**And today we gather to celebrate the lives of the extraordinary women who, in 1966, stood up for themselves and against the American Apartheid by enrolling as students at MSCW.**

**Their personal heroics of not just enrolling but also enduring a culture of segregation visited upon them by their fellow classmates, their teachers and their College President and his administration stand as an important testament to MUW's Challenge to "Dare, Dream and Believe".**

**And in their honor and in the spirit of this University, let us commit to live our lives with inspiration, always aspiring to make the choices that lead us to higher ground, that guides us to understanding and purpose of not just who we are but who we can become.**

**Let us be reminded that while it should never be difficult for each of us to promote the cause of liberty, we must remember that some of the greatest moments in our history have occurred when crisis has overcome complacency and someone challenges others to stand with them.**

**For there are lessons to be learned along the roadways that others have traveled in pursuit of their dreams of enjoying the full measure of equality. There are great moments in history when men, women and children stood their ground for the rights that were guaranteed to them. And today is the time when All Americans should fulfill the promise they pledge each time the American Flag goes by.**

**There should never be a bad time for us to engage in acts of public service that create opportunities for enlightenment and change, for we cannot expect the next generations of Americans to**

**do something to change the world, if we do nothing to recognize our obligations to service.**

**While history reminds us of the heroics of the giants of the Civil Rights Movement, we sometimes must remind one another that there were men, women and children who marched behind them. For they too faced the humiliation of shouting mobs and hate filled faces as they walked along city streets and manicured sidewalks of college campuses.**

**The mothers and daughters of the Civil Rights Movement never waivered in their belief that justice would come and they prayed for the day when the fair winds of freedom and following seas would carry them to the shores of a life without fear and a heart of purpose.**

**Their hopes, their dreams and their service made them heroines of their generations. And their courage and determination should inspire us to find our own moments of opportunity that can lead to hope rather than to roadways of shattered dreams that always lead back to where we started.**

**Their grace in the midst of hate should inspire us to believe that there is dignity in demanding that all of us deserve the full measure of justice and mercy under the law.**

**Their courage should harness the power in each of us to reach, to believe and stand firm in the belief that all lives count for something.**

**And their stories inspire others to believe that even in the midst of despair lies the power to overcome. For it was through their own lives that the women of the civil rights movement came to understand that what you stand for in your life is not as important as what you do in your life and it is the act of doing that unleashes the power of your spirit**

**The women of the Civil Rights Movement challenged others to stand with them and together they changed history and in their honor let us do for our daughters, what they did for us and teach them what standing up for themselves feels like.**

**There have been times in all of our lives where people have judged us by who we belonged to rather than who we are, where we came from rather than where we are going. For when curious voices ask those questions, they seek commonality and presume character in order to determine whether you should be invited to become part of their sorority of morality.**

**For presuming character by who you belong to offers an opportunity for a quick judgment of character rather a more bothersome investigation of our own personal humanity.**

**And even today, America's new found love affair with the birds of a feather flock together form of democracy bodes ill will for the rights of those who live on the outskirts of liberty and justice for all.**

**But if we remain true to the better part of our individual humanity where empathy, morality and love reside, we can rise to judge others by the content of their character rather than where they come from and who they belong to.**

**In the Spring of 1968, I submitted my application for admission to MSCW. Although I now realize that my anxiety about my admission was perhaps wasted, at the time I believed that my character, my grades and my achievements were what mattered.**

**But in reality, I was the daughter of America's most prominent and powerful segregationist where my hopes and dreams stood in the shadow of the Schoolhouse Door, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the Edmund Pettus Bridge. And what I saw as dark shadows cast across my family name, no doubt became points of light for the President of MSCW as my application was quickly approved.**

**But at this moment, after forty-eight years of absence, I am honored and thankful to have an opportunity to resubmit my application to MUW for the sake of history and for the truth of who I really was in the Summer of 1968.**

**I was born deep in the Alabama Black Belt twenty-one miles west of the Georgia state line. My mother, Lurleen was a housewife, and my father George, was a lawyer. We lived next to the grammar school in a white wood framed house with a wide front porch that sat in the shade of water oaks and pecan trees. In the light of summer sunsets, my mother would sit in the backyard with her friends while we played outside. And on Friday nights, my**

**father and I would watch boxing matches on TV and cheer for the underdog.**

**I lived amidst the crooks and crannies of happiness, laying in the backyards of my childhood looking for faces in the clouds of contentment that floated by. It was a place to shelter from storms of discontent and have hopes for the future. It was where my mother stood by the door or pulled back the curtains in the dark of night to watch for me coming home.**

**It was a place you could dream of returning to one day, to capture the past, to tell stories to your grandchildren of the way life used to be.**

**But for the cause of segregation, there were no hugs and kisses, no going away gifts or parties and no opportunities to say goodbye to my childhood when we left our home in Clayton when I was eleven years old. For we packed our clothes, turned off the lights and my father locked the kitchen door behind us. If my Mother had told me we were never coming back, perhaps I would have looked harder or faster at the places we passed by that could have reminded me of what my life had been like.**

**There was never an inkling of what was to become. From that moment on, our lives were hitched to an ascending star of power where the past didn't matter when there was so much to gain in the days that lay ahead.**

**When the house on Eufaula Street was destroyed by fire several years later, it was as if it was a warning to never look back.**

**There would be no place to take my sons, to show them what**

**happiness for me had looked like. And, but for the memories, there were no mementos or crinkled up photos to share with them.**

**I was twelve years old when my father was inaugurated as Governor and proclaimed segregation now, segregation tomorrow and segregation forever.**

**I was thirteen when he stood in the schoolhouse door.**

**I was fifteen when John Lewis, Amelia Boynton and others were attacked on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in March of 1965, the same year that my father failed in an attempt to pass a constitutional amendment that would allow him to run for a second term.**

**I was sixteen years old when I told my Mother I wanted her to share her time with me rather than run for Governor herself. But the week before I turned 17, I stood beneath a winter sky and heard the roars of approval as Lurleen Burns Wallace was inaugurated as Governor of Alabama.**

**On May 7th, 1968, two weeks before I graduated from High School, my mother died at home in the Alabama Governor's Mansion at the age of 41. Thousands of Alabamians stood in line for hours in the downtown streets of Montgomery waiting to pay their last respects to their Governor, as she lay in state in the rotunda of the Alabama Capitol.**

**In June and July, I traveled with the Wallace Presidential Campaign to stand by my father on rally stages, through America's Rust Belt and on to states in New England. I watched and listened as working-class men and women roared their approval at the**

notions of a more conservative country where true American Patriots would once again be in charge. And I heard the rising choruses of discontent from angry demonstrators that pushed their way inside.

Nighttime rallies often became angry mobs of supporters fighting with protesters, heaving chairs at one another and throwing things at us as we stood in front of large banners that read "Stand Up For America" on the stage.

On the night of July 26<sup>th</sup>, the crowd was both large and anxious as protesters unrolled banners and began to chant during a campaign rally on the outskirts of Providence, Rhode Island. Amidst fits of anger and roars of approval, fights broke out as my father called protesters pointy-headed liberals who wanted to run everything.

After the rally, security guards helped me escape from an angry mob and into my father's car. The dress that my Mother had bought me was covered with black spray paint and ink. A woman came up to the front passenger window and began beating on the glass with a leg from a metal folding chair. And then she was gone, fallen back and away into crowds of fury.

I used to think about the woman who came to the window. I wondered if she had children ..... and, I wondered what she would have done to me if I had rolled down the window.

The next morning, I was flown back to Montgomery. It was time to go to MSCW.

**A secret service agent helped me pack my car before driving me northwest toward Columbus. I will always remember what it felt like to watch mothers and daughters climbing out of cars while fathers opened trunks filled with suitcases of clothes and boxes of keepsakes and memories.**

**Following summer school in 1969, I left MSCW for the last time and for many years the overwhelming circumstances of my life during that time encouraged me to never look back. And for all these years, I never knew there were African American students who were willing to look beyond the circumstances of my birth in order to see me for who I had become.**

**How many times have all of us lived through missed opportunities for acts of compassion, moments of learning or opening new horizons in our own lives because of where we came from rather than who we were? It is in the character of all of us. It can be what protects us from disaster, from heartaches and loneliness. It is how we lived and how we learned. But we must believe that learning about the past is different from living in the past for we must believe that our best days are yet to come.**

**The events that have shaped American Democracy reach across the two hundred and forty-one years of our history. While some have claimed more notoriety than others, each story and**

**each life adds more to the ever-expanding mosaic of what we did, what we won, what we lost and who we have become. Each of our lives are historic, for we all count for something and each of our voices belong in the choir of American History.**

**In closing, I hope that each of you can live your life among moments of who you are rather than who you belong to, I challenge all of us of to stand up rather than stand by for liberty and justice for all and I pray that all Americans can find the hope of peace and promise in the words “we shall overcome.”**

**FOR WE CAN, WE MUST AND WE SHALL OVERCOME**

