From Roots to Wings, A Thank You Letter to Johnnetta B. Cole

BY DR. CLAUDIA SCHRADER

It’s hard to believe that two years ago, in the midst of the pandemic, I would walk the lonely halls of Kingsborough. The College shifted to remote operations and online instruction, and the campus was empty but for a few Public Safety Officers, custodians, and maintenance staff. Absent were the sounds I came to love of the campus bustling with the energy of students. It is in this silence that my mind drifted back to the time—prior to the pandemic, and long before I walked the halls of Kingsborough chatting with everyone in my path—when I saw Johnnetta B. Cole, Ph.D., president of Spelman College, walk the campus of Spelman College. I remember being awestruck and telling myself that if I ever became a college president, that she would be the kind of president I would want to be.

Upon graduating from high school, I attended Rutgers University where I would come to know Wendy, my first college friend and a kindred spirit. And although I didn’t know it then, she would be someone who would take me to the window of my future. Over the next two years, Wendy and I were inseparable. Although, we had different majors, we were able to take some of our core and elective courses together and spent many weekends studying and enjoying what seems now like fleeting moments.

I stumbled, walked, then skpped through my first two years in college. I started out as a journalism major and had less than positive experiences in my classes where I sat as the only person of color. In one class, after myraised hand routinely went unnoticed, I discovered I was invisible to both my classmates and instructors. This was enough for me to change my major to Africana Studies. I lost myself, found myself and saw myself in my new major and in the writings of Hurston, Morrison, and Walker. The insecurities I had as a woman who was once teased as a child because of her dark complexion faded away. And I found my voice, too; in dark complexion faded away.

Walking across campus, I know now that she was placed there to give me a glimpse of my future. As I enter my fifth year of my presidency at KCC, I recall the Sudanese proverb that tells says, “we bequeath two things to our children, the first is roots and the other is wings.” Today, I say “thank you” to Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, and the KCC faculty and staff for their powerful example of leadership and care that both grounds me and helps us all to lift students higher.

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As I reflect on that day many years ago when Dr. Cole, Spelman College’s seventh president and the first Black woman to lead the College, was walking across campus, I know now that she was placed there to give me a glimpse of my future. As I enter my fifth year of my presidency at KCC, I recall the Sudanese proverb that tells says, “we bequeath two things to our children, the first is roots and the other is wings.” Today, I say “thank you” to Dr. Johnnetta B. Cole, and the KCC faculty and staff for their powerful example of leadership and care that both grounds me and helps us all to lift students higher.

Dr. Claudia V. Schrader is president of Kingsborough Community College, personally congratulates KCC graduating students during commencement.

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