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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 skipped 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 my raised 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 my writing assignments and during class. And guess what, turns out I was not invisible af-



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

ter all. My professors knew me, they knew my name and I knew theirs.

Overall, I was pleased with my undergraduate experience, and I was looking forward to calling Rutgers my alma mater one day. Wendy, however, had different aspirations. Although she enjoyed her time at Rutgers, it wasn't her first choice; Spelman College was and she was planning to transfer there. At the end of our second year, she left to make trails to Atlanta. In spring 1990, my last semester at Rutgers, we planned for me to visit her at Spelman.

Spelman was indeed 'A Different World'. On a walk around the campus, Wendy pointed out a woman who she said was the president of the college. I remember seeing her walking across the campus, stopping frequently to talk to

students. As I neared her, I overheard her greeting, talking to, and calling students by their names...imagine that, their actual names! I was in awe not only of her easy way with students, but that she knew who students were and that she was interested in what they had to say. It was in that moment that I said to myself, "if I ever became a college president, this is the kind I would want to be."

On the first day of classes this semester, I continued a tradition I started in the spring of 2019, but perhaps with more excitement than ever; I stood at the front gate to welcome students. During the first week, I walked the halls to soak up the gleeful energy of students and the college community. My heart leapt each time a student would call me by my name, run over to say hello and greet me

with a hug. My memories of that day at Spelman College came flooding back and I was reminded of the indelible impact my chance observation of Johnnetta B. Cole had on my life.

Her impact continues to manifest in my leadership through my Welcome Wagons that visit incoming students at their homes, to my weekly motivational emails to students. I strive to connect with students often. And it comes naturally here at KCC, because this community has and will always be one that cares deeply for students.

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 (KCC), a 72-acre academic oasis in beautiful Manhattan Beach, Brooklyn that offers students over 50 academic programs, 100 percent online degrees and affordable two-year degrees for their future. For more information about Kingsborough, visit the website at www.kingsborough.edu.