

The College of New Jersey
Phi Beta Kappa Induction Ceremony
April 26, 2023

Remarks of Tammy Tibbetts '07
Co-Founder and CEO
She's The First

As prepared for delivery

I was in the first class of inductees. I had forgotten about that until the chapter reached out. As the founding CEO of a nonprofit called She's the First, I guess you can say being a first seems to be a trend in my life.

How many of you identify as firsts in some way in your family?

First to graduate college?

First to pursue a certain career path?

First to have studied abroad?

First to be inducted into an honor society?

First to navigate your teenage years and school during a global pandemic?

All of you. All of us.

For some of us, "first" is a deeply rooted part of our identity. First generation immigrant. Child of first generation immigrants. First generation college student and graduate. Which is what I am.

Even if being a "first" is not how you identify at first pass, the reality is we will all move through life doing things for the first time! You're in a season of life now with a lot of firsts...learning to be independent, trying new things at college, working to land your first big job. You're constantly putting yourself up to challenges you've never done before. AND, turns out, you happened to be doing it to the highest standard in higher education. Just in case you are modest, well I'm happy to tell you, this is a BIG DEAL.

What you have done and continue to do takes guts, bravery. Not just smarts, which we know you have plenty of. You have excelled as part of a generation that is at once underestimated and overburdened. On one hand, society will say you're too dependent on technology, you're overly sensitive, you're not engaged or responsive, blah blah. And on the other hand, they'll put all the

world's problems - the climate crisis, economic instability, racial discrimination, gun control - on your shoulders to fix one day, like you are superheroes.

The truth is, you kind of are. You shouldn't have to be superheroes, but you are. I see it. I work with and for youth activists (those who identify as girls under the age of 23) every day. I see girls around the world, including here in the U.S. take a stand for their rights. They organize murals, demonstrations, documentary screenings, letter writing campaigns, you name it. (There's a chapter of *She's the First* here at TCNJ, maybe some of you have even been part of those efforts!)

My point is, you're an extraordinary group of firsts and trailblazers and changemakers, who have found a way to thrive in a challenging time. During a global pandemic.

Even when you're excited about the future, every day forward can still feel like a lot of pressure. I want you to know you aren't alone.

In addition to this support system you have around you at TCNJ, when you are on your journey of doing things for the first time, don't forget you have a superpower: your love of learning. Your love of learning is ultimately why we are all here today.

I learned how to be an entrepreneur here at TCNJ, even though I wasn't trying to be one. I wanted to work at a corporation.

But, it turns out being a first is excellent prep for becoming an "entrepreneur," - because as a first, naturally, you have to learn as you go along.

I now have a staff of 11 and an annual budget of about \$2M, but in the beginning it was just me, my cofounder and a few hundred dollars. You do *everything* as a founder - raise money, do the PR, advertising, finance and bookkeeping, designing programs, organizing events, on and on.

I didn't take any business classes, I probably should have...but turns out I was served just as well by my supportive professors in the Journalism program. Fortunately, Journalism is the art of asking smart questions, and that's the fastest way to learn.

One of the reasons I am here today is because I had a professor, the legendary Kim Pearson, who allowed me to do an independent study my senior year, so that I could have a more flexible schedule to go off to New York City two days a week for a magazine internship....That was my original dream job, to be a magazine editor.

During that independent study,

- I reported a full length feature story on a nonprofit serving children in Liberia.
- On one hand, I learned the journalistic techniques of long-form storytelling, and because it was a multimedia course, I had to turn the article into a website with audio, photos and video. (Professor Pearson was very visionary and knew this is where the industry was headed.)
- On the other hand, as a student reporter taking on a global story, I learned facts I found shocking, on the rate of girls dropping out of school. On the rate of teen girls becoming pregnant because their governments were not mandating comprehensive sex education programs, nor dealing with root causes of gender based violence. I wrote lots of articles during my time at TCNJ, but I couldn't shake this story.
- This assignment led me to become a volunteer for the organization I wrote about for the first few years after I graduated. This was probably a sign I wasn't going to make it very far as a journalist. I couldn't stay on the sidelines of a story, one about girls who wanted to be the first in their families to graduate. I had to get in the fight.

Looking back, I see how everything I do today traces back to this experience where my professor gave me the agency to build my own learning experience, as the capstone to my college years. She knew the value of me being in the field in a magazine internship. It could lead to a job offer...and it did. During her office hours, she taught me how I could follow my own questions to build a learning experience that would prepare me for a career well into the 21st Century.

When I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa, of course it meant something special to have the validation of the best academic honor society. But Professor Pearson taught me, this first generation college student trying to find her way in a big city career, that I could validate myself. That I could write a story about the change I wanted to see in the world. And turns out, she knew I could *be* the change too, well before I did.

My takeaway here is that my academic experiences at TCNJ directly shaped my trajectory to become a nonprofit cofounder and CEO. I thought I was going to be a journalist, but I ended up on a career path bigger than my dreams.

I have been able to grow as a leader with She's the First, and write a book along the way. I'm now developing our Kenya office and working on a plan to pass the baton onto the next CEO in 2025, who will be based in Kenya. Every week I'm learning how to do complex management things I won't bore you with the details on. It's hard - but I ask questions and I figure it out.

I hope there is something in my story that serves you. If nothing else, I hope you see an alumn who can promise you there's a future beyond your wildest dreams out there. And that you're reminded when you don't have the answers, you DO have the questions. Follow your love of

learning where they lead you...and never stop being proud of you and the firsts you've bravely pursued.