

Phi Beta Kappa Address  
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April 23, 2025  
“A Fire to Be Kindled”

President Borland, esteemed colleagues, fellow inductees, distinguished guests, and families and friends, welcome. Thank you for selecting me to be an Honorary Member of Phi Beta Kappa. It is the greatest honor that I have ever received. It also serves as an exclamation point at the end of my long teaching career. I am retiring; this is my last semester teaching. President Borland, thank you for inviting me to deliver this keynote address.

To my fellow inductees, you should all be proud of your accomplishments, of your academic achievement, and of your engagement in the liberal arts. Perhaps you do not appreciate how big a deal membership in Phi Beta Kappa is. When a student whom I had nominated received an invitation to be inducted, she asked me, “Is it really worth it?” This is what I said to her. “When a person is famous enough or wealthy enough to have their obituary in the *New York Times*, they have made sure that their membership in Phi Beta Kappa is mentioned. So yes, it is a really big deal.” Each one of you should be proud of being a member of this distinguished society of scholars. In particular, I want to acknowledge those inductees who are first generation college students. That you have excelled to this level of recognition is extraordinary.

You see, I, too was a first generation college student. My maternal grandmother never completed primary school and my father never graduated from high school. From my own college experience and from having spent my career teaching, advising, and mentoring undergraduates, I understand the unique challenges that you faced. And yet, here you are! I congratulate those of you who are first generation college students, but I heartily congratulate all of the inductees. For each of you, your induction into Phi Beta Kappa is quite an achievement.

I wish to invite all of the inductees to think about how you got here. I am confident that you had some special people who guided you and inspired you along the way to your becoming the well-rounded scholar that you are. I know that I did. For me, those people instilled in me values that have guided me throughout my life.

There is a quote from Plutarch that has hung on my office wall since before I came to TCNJ 35 years ago: “The mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled.” It continually inspires me to think about how I might kindle that fire, that love of learning, in my students. In preparing this address, I thought about the special people in my life who “kindled a fire” in me. Please indulge me as I share stories about a couple of them.

I grew up in an immigrant, working-class neighborhood in Chicago. In elementary school I had the same teacher for both third grade and fourth grade: Mrs. Margaret McCarrin. At some point during my two years in her classroom, she started inviting my mother and me to meet her and her three sons in downtown Chicago on about one weekend a month. She took us to the Museum of Natural History, to the Art Institute, to lectures at the Chicago Historical Society, and to other intellectually stimulating experiences where the four of us often were the only kids in attendance.

I recognize now that she was “kindling a fire” in me. I am grateful for how she instilled in me curiosity, a sense of wonder, and a love of the arts, history and, of course, science. She was the one who initially encouraged me to enter the annual science fair in my school. In sixth grade, I was selected to be the single representative from my school to go to Chicago’s city-wide science fair. I did not win a prize that day, but what I had previously received from Mrs. McCarrin was worth so much more than any blue ribbon.

At the end of sixth grade, my parents moved to the suburbs to one of the most highly-ranked public high schools in the country. My parents sacrificed a lot to be able to move into this school district. That new school district was really big. My high school had 5,400 students. Although I could have simply disappeared into such a huge student population, an advantage to the school being so large was the many course offerings and clubs that were available. I joined the Independent Study Club. We met after school, learning how to formulate scientific hypotheses, and then we designed and conducted experiments to test them. I know, I totally got my geek on. An incredibly supportive teacher, Mr. Donald Axelson, ran the club. With his encouragement, I designed my own extensive experiment. I conducted it at home with my own real microscope (not a toy one) that I had purchased with my savings from years of doing yardwork for neighbors. Okay, double geek points for this.

In my senior year, Mr. Axelson had me enter that research project in what is now called the Regeneron Science Talent Search, the nation's oldest and most prestigious science research competition for high school students. I naively thought it was just another science fair. Mr. Axelson knew otherwise when he encouraged me to enter. I ended up being a state finalist, and I got to travel to the University of Illinois to present my research in front of a panel of judges. This was no science fair. It was more like a Ph.D. dissertation defense. I won state honorable mention. My classmate James would go on to win first place in the nation for some complex math problem that he did. He got to go to the Whitehouse and meet President Nixon. Dang! Oh, he also won \$10,000, which was a huge amount of money back in 1971. Me? I got a certificate. But, I was not disappointed. I had been encouraged to enter the competition because of the research that I had done to satisfy my own curiosity. I had not done the research in order to enter the competition. And, that pretty much describes my motivation for doing science for the next 55 years. I do research because I love it, not because I expect any recognition, even though my mother would wish out loud that she hoped to see me maybe someday win a Nobel Prize. Sorry, Mom. But, this anecdote is not about the accomplishments by James or by me. It is about Mr. Axelson, and how he fostered my sense of inquiry and how he led me to understand that I wanted to—no, needed to—make science my life's work.

These are just two of the many influential people in my life who believed in me and for whom I am grateful. For me, the best way that I could express my gratitude for their encouragement, nurturing, and inspiration has been to devote my career to providing support and opportunities to others. My life has been guided by the values that these special people instilled in me. These values led me to joining the Peace Corps. And, living into these values also led me to joining the faculty here at TCNJ, where I have had the opportunity to nurture students by interacting with them in the classroom and through engaging them in my own research.

Here at TCNJ, I also have been able to extend my support of students beyond the classroom and my research lab. For example, three other faculty members and I created COSA, the Celebration of Student Achievement. This event not only allows students to showcase their scholarly and creative work, but it puts their accomplishments on display, so that other students might realize that they, too, are capable of doing that same sort of thing. Next Tuesday will be COSA's 28<sup>th</sup> year.

I also led the development of the PERSIST Scholars Program. This program was funded for twelve years by \$1.2 million dollars in grants to TCNJ from the National Science Foundation. It provided need-based scholarships and other support to students majoring in Biology and Chemistry, most of whom were first generation college students. The scholarship money was important, but the key to the academic and personal success of these students was the support services that we were able to provide, including dedicated faculty mentors. The PERSIST program fostered a sense of community among the participants and, more importantly, fostered a sense of belonging in their respective science majors. At its conclusion, the PERSIST program was cited by the National Science Foundation as the

most successful program of its kind that the NSF had ever funded. Many of the PERSIST scholars went on to earn Masters, M.D. and Ph.D. degrees. Talk about kindling some fires!

And, this is why we all need to support and advocate for programs that fund and enrich educational opportunities!

Your (and my) induction into Phi Beta Kappa is not just about an honor cord or a pin or a special handshake. Membership in this honor society is about a commitment to future excellence, a responsibility to promoting its values, and the anticipation of your living into its motto, “Love of learning is the guide of life.” In addition to these, I suggest that your induction also comes with another responsibility. That is for you to inspire others, for you to be their Mrs. McCarrin or their Mr. Axelson or whoever in your life inspired you. You won’t have to become a school teacher or a professor to do this. Reach out to your niece or nephew, to your neighbor’s kid, or to someone you just happen to know. Introduce them to amazing experiences that are just awaiting discovery. Tell them that you believe in them. Give them the motivation and courage to reach beyond their grasp. Help them to discover a love of learning, so that it may guide their life, too.

Thank you to my colleagues in the Delta Chapter of New Jersey for bestowing upon me this great honor. Congratulations to my fellow inductees. Now go out and kindle some fires.