

CAMP COURANT KEYNOTE
December 20, 2006

I want to thank Beth Gibbs for inviting me to tonight's annual meeting. As someone who is relatively new to Connecticut, it is ALWAYS a pleasure for me to get to know community groups that are making a difference in the lives of the people of our state. Camp Courant is certainly right up near the top of the list. Not only is it the largest free summer day camp in the country, it also has a long history of service. It's rare when you find something that has been such a big part of the community for so long. Eastern Connecticut State University began as a two-year normal school in 1889. I see that Camp Courant started just five years later in 1894 — and we are both still here! What a tradition of service to Hartford's children Camp Courant has been.

I am impressed with the work of the campus counselors and other staff who work each summer to give children in the

Hartford area such a strong day camp program. It's not easy taking care of almost 1,000 children every day, but you did it this year. And the hundreds of onsite volunteers and staff could not do their work were it not for the Camp's board, committees, and donors — both individuals and organizations — who support Camp Courant so generously. It takes everyone involved to make the camp successful, and you have joined hands in making sure the children are well served. I applaud those efforts.

Today, I see that your focus, as it should be, is serving underprivileged children, with 80% of the children coming from low-income households. The impact you have on these children's lives cannot be overstated. Not only is Camp Courant the highlight of these children's day, but it has a lasting influence on their lives.

In looking over the Camp's informational materials, it is clear to me that kids at Camp Courant have fun. They get lots of physical exercise, be it in the swimming pool, on a nature walk, or in some other athletic endeavor. They are fed nourishing meals. And they enjoy arts and crafts activities that are not only enjoyable but skill-building at the same time. These types of summer day camp activities can be found across America.

What I especially impressed with at Camp Courant is your commitment to adding value to that experience, by building in educational and life skill components. Computer skills, team building, health care, leadership skills, socialization—what an exceptional curriculum you have developed. Your Early Learning Center for the kindergarten and first grade kids is a great reminder that we must build a person's academic and social success at an early age. Giving people an opportunity to discover their own potential — that

kernel of possibility — and then to nurture it, support it, and watch it grow—isn't that what we are all about? I know that is your goal at Camp Courant. It's more than giving someone an active, rewarding summer experience. It's about supporting each child in their own act of self-discovery and transformation. I know that is what you do here. It's the same path we are on at Eastern — we want each student to find that light bulb, that life motivator, and then we help them turn on the switch.

That's also what has happened to me in my life. I have had many people with me during my journey, people who helped me to discover my potential, and then stood by me as I worked on fulfilling my dreams. Allow me to share some of the influences in my life, people who mentored and supported me as I went from the mountains of Puerto Rico as a young child to my career path today in university administration. I want to tell you about four people.

(ELSA TO EXPAND ON EACH)

1. My father. (reads the newspaper every day. I would sit on his lap as a child while he read the paper to me. He told me that education was the way out of the projects in New Jersey and he gave me courage to follow my path.)
2. Dr. McGee at Montclair State College. He tutored me in English and in writing college-level term papers.
3. Dr. Touma, a professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where I rec'd my master's degree. He encouraged me to continue for my doctorate.
4. Maria Mercado and her colleagues at the Ford Foundation, which paid for my entire doctoral program.

What do these four mentors have in common with each other and with the people who run Camp Courant? They believed in my potential, as you believe in the abilities of the children you nurture each day at Camp Courant. They all believed that part of their responsibility, both as professionals

and as members of our society, was to lend a hand to young people, to lift them up, to encourage them as they get ready for their life's journey. You believe in that same vision.

We always hear how "the children are our future." This is true, but only if we invest in them now. You do that every day for the children who attend Camp Courant. I know their lives are irrevocably changed for the better by your efforts. Again, I commend you. I applaud you. And I wish you the very best as you seek to strengthen this wonderful community resource. Thank you again for having me. It has been my pleasure.