

**“Girls and Young Women Succeed
When Someone Deeply Cares About Them”
March 16, 2020
Hartford Foundation of Public Giving**

I would like to start my remarks by thanking Betty Ann Grady for inviting me to speak with you at tonight’s event. I also want to acknowledge Theodore Sergi, chair of the Board of Directors, and his fellow board members. They are doing a wonderful job as stewards of the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving.

Finally, I would like to thank Terry Schmitt, chair of the Catalyst Endowment Fund’s steering committee, for hosting this “Let’s Hear It For the Girls” celebration.

Eastern Connecticut State University has a long relationship with the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. At the end of my remarks, I am going to show you a video of a program at Eastern that I am very proud of—the Dual College Program.

We started it 13 years ago, and its initial success was in large part due to financial support provided by The Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. I will always be indebted to the organization’s generosity. Let me acknowledge several more recent examples of the Foundation’s work.

The Hartford Youth Service Corps was launched by Mayor Luke Bronin in 2016 to reengage youth who have been derailed by life’s challenges. Our Piece of the Pie, which is administering the program, received a one-year \$750,000 grant from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to support workforce development and service learning programs for 250 youth. This is just one example of how the Foundation is investing in our youth — they are the future of our communities.

This past year, the Foundation granted almost **\$37 million** to local nonprofits and organizations. And the Catalyst Endowment Fund, the focus of tonight’s event, is putting resources to bear on critical issues ranging from mental health to family economic security to neighborhood blight and the juvenile justice system.

In 2017, the CEF awarded a grant to the Connecticut Center for Advanced Technology to recruit and support women in advanced manufacturing careers through training, internships, pre-apprentice programs and job placement. Of the 38 women who have been placed in manufacturing jobs, 18 were hired by Pratt & Whitney at a starting wage of \$28.75 an hour. This is another Hartford Foundation success story, and on that is so important to providing life-changing opportunities to young women.

The title of my talk this evening is “Girls and Young Women Succeed When Someone Cares Deeply About Them.” This is true for boys and young men as well. Even affluent children are more likely to succeed when they have people in their lives who care about them. We all need nurturing.

But I want to focus today on girls and young women, especially the most vulnerable and least privileged. We know that young women of color, those from low-income families, those living in our urban core have challenges to overcome that others don’t have to face.

I want to talk in detail about some of those challenges. I also will share some of my story of how I overcame challenges I faced. And I want to share some thoughts with you on how you might “care deeply” about young women by actively supporting their success in your own way.

First let's look at some data to set the stage for talking about the hurdles facing young women of color in this country and right here in Hartford. As you hear these numbers, I urge you to use this information as motivation to reenergize your commitment to equality—it might be easy to feel deflated otherwise.

- Only 33 of Fortune 500 CEOs are women; and only 167 of the CEOs of the top 3,000 companies are women.
- Women of color make up 4% of all executive positions in the private sector; men of color make up 10%.
- Only 25% of state legislators are women
- Only 23% of the House of Representatives are women
- Only 21 of 100 U.S. Senators are women
- Women earn 79 cents on the dollar compared to men.
- In Connecticut, women of color earn 47 cents on the dollar; that's deplorable! We must change that!

What are some of the challenges facing girls and young women of color and those from low-income families as they attempt to realize their potential, fulfill their dreams, and reverse the numbers I have just shared?

1. Stereotypes: “Women are too emotional to run a company.” “Women don't stay long enough to move up the ladder.”

The Wall Street Journal had a great article last month that explained in detail why women in the corporate world continue to face stereotypes and a glass ceiling. They found that women tend to end up in support functions in corporations — human resources, legal, administration, even IT — rather than “P&L” or profit and loss positions such as sales, COO, or division head.

Women who HAVE made it to the position of CEO offer a number of strategies for change, including (1) formal structures to support women developing their leadership skills, (2) executive coaching, and (3) the need for women to be bolder in advocating for themselves.

Here's a very interesting finding: in a study of 2,600 senior executives, women are as likely to possess CEO skills and charisma as men, but 28% less likely to become CEOs. We need to change the culture!

One specific occupational area we need to address is STEM. The stereotype there is “women can't succeed in math and science.” The American Association of University Women did a fascinating study on this issue. More stereotypes and surprising findings!

Young women enter STEM careers at lower rates than business, medicine, and law. Why? Negative stereotypes lower girls' performance on STEM-related tests. They also lower girls' aspirations for STEM careers.

Yet when test administrators tell students that girls and boys have similar skill sets, girls' performance improves. It's all about learning environments and how we encourage girls.

Girls assess their own performance lower than boys do, even when they have the same level of competence. Girls believe they must do better than boys to excel in male-dominant fields. We need to encourage them to have confidence in themselves and focus on their own success.

One more stereotype is that girls' spatial skills are inherently lower. But research finds that a training course can quickly overcome this perceived gap.

And then there is the "Double Bind," where women who are successful in STEM jobs traditionally held by men must endure the stigma that they must be "hard to work with" or "unlikeable."

In the end, it's not about lack of talent or motivation—we need to change the culture and learning environments surrounding girls and young women to support their aspirations to attain STEM careers.

2. **The challenges facing first-generation students are significant:** First-generation college students who have no family members with college experience are at a disadvantage. Applying to college, filling out forms, navigating campus culture—no one is there to provide guidance. I experienced this myself years ago.
Tell the story about the time you saw Susan filling out her college application and you told her she didn't need to do that: "They just come and get us." You were totally unfamiliar with the application process.
3. **Finances:** the data is clear that economic status, more than race, is the determinant in who goes to college and who doesn't. Low-income families, even with Pell grants and loans, have difficulty affording a college education for their daughters. And loan debt can have a crippling effect on a family. In addition to the work of people like the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, I ask each of you—what can you do to help even one young woman financially so that she can realize her dream of a college education?
4. **Academic preparation to succeed in college.** The Achievement Gap that we have been working on for decades impacts impacts people of color, low-income families, and urban residents disproportionately.

National Assessment of Educational Progress data shows that babies in this nation have the same cognitive and motor functions at age nine months, regardless of ethnicity, socio-economic status, the educational level of the mother and the marital status of the mother. By age 2, socio-economics start to separate affluent from low-income children.

By the time children are in high school and beyond, data shows that students of color, students from low-income households, and urban students have lower high school graduation rates and lower college attendance rates. Connecticut historically has had the worst attainment gap in the country!

That data is also tied to where those children go to high school. Much of the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving's work is to break down some of those systemic barriers to success—to reduce the Achievement Gap.

I am sure each of you has your own list of barriers and hurdles you have overcome to reach the level of success you enjoy today. I have my own, and I would like to share some of them with you and tell you about the people who were right there with me in helping meet those challenges.

My first story took place after my family moved to Newark, New Jersey for a better life when I was eight. I went to a Catholic girls' high school and confronted bigotry from an unlikely source.

In my senior year, I got accepted at Rutgers, at my local teachers' college (Montclair) and at Middlebury College in Vermont. Mother Superior hauled me into her office to ask me, "Who do you know?" She couldn't believe I had been accepted by Middlebury.

We must have known someone — an alumnus or important administrator. How else could I have been accepted at such an elite private college? But we had no money. We had no connections. No one owed us favors. I was a poor Puerto Rican girl from the housing projects.

I got in because . . . I earned it. I ended up not going to Middlebury—it was too far away for my family to visit easily. But I saw ignorance in an unexpected place, and I realized how people in power will always fear sharing that power with people they have thought less of. We have to fight hard for our rights, and then fight harder to retain them. I look around at the political landscape today and realize that the struggle will never be over.

I have worked hard as an educator to fight against stereotypes and bigotry. I am sure each of you can think of times when you confronted racism and ignorance.

What can we do to help today's generation deal with those same institutional barriers, those same prejudices? They haven't gone away.

Let me share one other challenge I faced growing up, and the person who was there to help me face it. When I arrived at Montclair College in my freshman year, I was the only Latina there. I wasn't dressed like the other girls. I stood out and wished that I didn't. And it became soon apparent that my writing skills were not at the college level.

Each of us can think of **someone who mentored us** — typically a teacher — and helped us over some hurdle or barrier. In my case, it was my Freshman English Professor at Montclair, Dr. Morris McGee.

At the beginning of Dr. McGee's first class, he read everybody's name from the roster. When he got to my name, he said with a flourish and with the intonation of someone familiar with the Spanish language, "Elsa Maria Núñez, what a beautiful name." For the first time, I heard my name spoken like that by an American, by a non-Spanish speaker.

"Elsa Maria Núñez" had a very different sound from William Smith or Teddy Doyle—so my name stood out. Dr. McGee, of course, was trying to make me comfortable.

Professor McGee was very good, but I was intimidated in class. As someone whose native language was not English, I knew that my writing skills lacked polish and consistency. I was nervous and apprehensive. I never opened my mouth, never answered a question, and Professor McGee never called on me; I just sat there frozen.

Then it was time for our first writing assignment. I wrote an essay, and when I got it back and saw all the red marks on my paper, I was horrified. It was covered. You couldn't see my handwriting. At the end, it said, "You need to see me in my office." I thought, "Oh my God. I am done!"

The next day I went to Professor McGee's office. When I arrived, he said, "Elsa, you are intelligent and you have a lot of potential but your writing is very poor. The only way you are going to get through this course is to come to my office every week and work on your revisions."

I would write a paper, receive it back covered with red marks, and then go to his office on Saturdays and rewrite it. Professor McGee would review it and give me suggestions, and then grade me after I rewrote the paper. He never gave me a grade for the version with all the red marks on it.

As the semester went on, he would encourage me. He would say, “Your writing is getting better.” He always had a word of encouragement.

At the end of the course, I had a solid “B,” and I was happy to get that grade. I was the only minority student in a class of middle-class, privileged girls, an immigrant whose native language was Spanish. And I had gained confidence that I could write at the college level.

Dr. McGee not only validated my own self-worth, he ingrained in me the role we can play as mentors for young minds and tender hearts. When we can teach and serve young people, we are literally saving lives. Perhaps you also can think of a time in your own life when someone mentored you as Dr. McGee mentored me. Or you have had the opportunity to mentor a young girl or woman in an academic or other experience. When we have those opportunities, they change lives forever.

- Mentoring is just one way for us to “care deeply” about a young person. Let me share with you other ways each of us can help a young woman or girl prepare to succeed in this world.
- Sponsor a teenager at summer camp. Sometimes getting away from city streets for the summer can do wonders for a child’s morale or life perspective.
- Provide internship opportunities to high school and college students at your place of work.
- Fund a scholarship at your local community college or university. It doesn’t have to be full tuition; your financial support can help students buy books or pay for some other expense associated with college.
- Volunteer on the board or on the ground working for a nonprofit organization that provides direct service to girls and young women. Whether it provides job training, teenage pregnancy support, nutritional services, housing, or some other form of support, find a way to roll up your sleeves.
- Take a girl out for a cultural outing. Give them experiences they aren’t going to have otherwise. Expose them to a bigger world and it will inspire them to aspire to bigger things.
- Hire a young woman . . . or several ... at your place of business.
- Speak at a high school, youth group, church—anywhere you can find young people to support and inspire. You are role models they need exposure to.
- Investigate your local literacy program. Perhaps you can read to children. Or buy books kids can take home. One of the factors in the Achievement Gap is the lack of reading materials in low-income homes.
- Perhaps you have a strategy of your own you can share with us during the question and answer session after I finish my remarks.

I told you earlier about the support the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving provided to Eastern more than a decade ago to support our Dual College Program. Let me tell you briefly about the program, and then I want to close with a short video about it.

I visited Hartford Public High School in Hartford’s inner city in 2007 and found they had students not targeted for college who could benefit from an immersive college experience. We

began the program with a model that included remedial instruction at our local community college, on-campus housing, on-campus employment, peer and faculty mentors, intensive advising, tutoring, and other supports.

Financial support has come from local foundations such as the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving, the U.S. Department of Justice and the WalMart Foundation, to name just a few benefactors.

Over the years, more than 100 students from Hartford Public High School and Manchester High School have enrolled in the program. Some graduates have earned master's degrees in child psychology, social work and other disciplines. One graduate has two master's degrees and works at Stanford. All of this has led to the following results:

- In 2012, The Public Trust determined Eastern had the largest increase in Hispanic graduation rates among all public institutions surveyed in the United States. We tripled our graduation rate for Latino students from 20% to 58% over the six-year period surveyed, a rate of improvement that was ten-fold that of other public institutions in the study.
- The Chronicle of Higher Education determined we had the highest percentage of minority faculty among all colleges and universities in Connecticut, including Yale, Wesleyan, UCONN—everyone!
- In fall 2018, our overall freshman-sophomore retention rate was over 80% for the first time; it was exactly at 80%. Our Latino retention rate was 83%, and our African American retention rate was 86%!
- More than 40% of our students continue to be first-generation students, a reflection of our commitment to access and our mission as a public institution.
- Even so, the high school GPAs and SAT scores of entering freshmen continue to increase. We have maintained academic excellence and access at the same time.

All these accomplishments—the percentage of minority faculty, our Latino retention rates, the DACA program—began with the Dual College Program and the support we received more than a decade ago from the Hartford Foundation of Public Giving. Let me show you a short video about that program.

In closing, I want to go back to what I said at the beginning of my remarks. The data is clear, reinforced by the experiences of many of you in this room, that young women of color, from low-income families, or faced with live in the inner city, face systematic challenges they must overcome to be successful. I have shared just a few of those challenges and illustrated several with my own life's story. Some of you have faced similar barriers.

But by the Lord's Grace, I have had people in my life who have helped me overcome those obstacles, people like Dr. Morris McGee.

Today, you and I have many opportunities to help other young women and young girls overcome their own barriers to success. Find a way to care deeply about their success—one girl at a time. I promise you, the reward for your efforts will be humbling and gratifying.

Thank you!