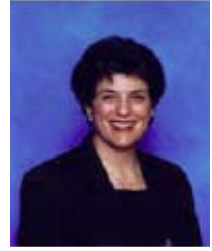


Remarks at Convention Banquet by Outgoing President Maria DeWald



When I became president three years ago, I asked you a question about "connecting the dots". As I leave, I would ask another question. Have you ever been given an unexpected gift? A few weeks ago I received one of those gifts while I was in Syracuse for an environmental conference the PTA was co-sponsoring. I got there late that evening and while out for an exploration noticed people streaming into a theatre a few blocks from the hotel. I went in to see what was going on and found out that it was the world premiere of a play called "Tales from the Salt City". I went up to the window and asked if they had any tickets and how much they were. "Yes", the young college student said, "they are \$30". I thanked him and went over to read the billboard about the play. Turns out Salt City is a nickname for Syracuse and the play was based on the living biographies of the seven citizens of Syracuse that would star in the show.

I went back to the window and asked if I would enjoy the play if I wasn't from Syracuse. The manager was there at that point and he smiled and said, "Absolutely, here's a complimentary ticket for you and welcome to Syracuse." Gift #1

The play was conceived and directed by Ping Chong who, it turns out, is quite famous. The play was part of an ongoing series of interview-based theatre works known as the Undesirable Elements series. Director Chong goes around to various cities and towns around the country and world and, using real people and their life experiences, examines issues of race, class, culture, and identity in the lives of those specific communities. There are more than three dozen of these works so far but this one was in Syracuse, this one was now, and it featured a refugee from Cambodia, a legal Mexican immigrant, a Macedonian here by marriage, a native American Onondaga Indian, a young Sudanese man from Darfur, a Cuban who won the "visa lottery", and an African American Syracuse native. From so many different places, and with such different cultures, yet all with such common wishes and dreams and contributing to the life and texture of Syracuse. Is this not true of all parents and all schools and all communities. Is this not why we speak about making every child's potential a reality no matter their roots, their culture or the place that they live. Definitely Gift #2.

But what does this have to do with tonight's farewell speech? Well, Gift #3 was that I suddenly knew what I needed to say to you at this time of transition. I had been thinking about it for quite awhile. Jotting down notes and quotes. Wondering how to say what was in my heart. And Syracuse that evening gave me the answer I had sought... that the work of the PTA, its mission and its children, my family and all of you, have been a gift to me.

"If wisdom begins in wonder", as Socrates said, after being your president for 3 years, I know I must be wiser because of the gift of wonder you all have given to me. Every time I visit a school, or a region, or a community event on your behalf, I see evidence of the passion and energy and service of our members. Every time I come or go from home, I see evidence of the support of my family. At every turn, I see the desire and advocacy and hard work to make this world a better place for children. It is a gift to be around people like that; really the best anywhere.

A few months ago, one of my board members asked me what accomplishment I was most proud of and for a minute I was stunned into silence. I truly hadn't thought about it in that way... too busy to think in those terms. Surely I have had the wish to "connect as many dots as I could" but there were so many left to be connected. Surely I had made sure we set

Executive Committee Goals at a retreat each and every year of my presidency. Surely we had systematically accomplished many of those goals. But which was I proudest of? Was it the Minority Leaders Strand at Summer Leadership and the potential for growth it promised? Was it the re-institution of Lobby Day and the institution of Virtual Lobby Day and the planting of the seeds for region advocacy teams? Maybe the three-year Summit on Family Engagement we cosponsored with our EPIC partner which has the potential to create systemic change in our colleges and schools. Or perhaps our many new collaborations and outreach efforts or our modernized tools such as the updated website and CapWiz. Was it the continued growth of the staffing model or our efficient oversight of our finances, including the beginnings of a sponsorship program, in order to not raise dues? No, not really. What I guess I am proudest of are these things: that I agreed to try my best and I did; that my Board and Executive Committee trusted me to do it and gave me their support and their friendship; that I listened and left room for leadership to flourish, and that all of the board and all of you also continued to say "yes" for children and PTA. Yes, our resources may not be vast but we have the biggest resource of all---you! None of the things I mentioned before could have happened without my board, my family, and without you. That, my friends, is a gift that will always be with me. From the bottom of my heart, thank you!

Maria DeWald