



WESTRIDGE SCHOOL

Convocation Remarks, Elizabeth J. McGregor, Head of School August 26, 2020

Each year, Convocation provides an opportunity for me to talk to our Westridge community, about what I believe are the most important guiding principles and actions for the year ahead.

And this year, my Convocation message seems more relevant than ever before.

We are living through a very difficult period in our history. As a nation, as a school, and as individuals, our lives have been turned upside down by the pandemic, and we have been painfully reminded by the racial reckoning of this summer that racism and racial inequity remain deeply rooted in our society and its institutions, including ours. Yet, history has shown that in times of crisis, trauma, and profound change, people unite, they grow stronger together, and indeed push each other to do better. This makes me think of something foundational to Westridge: our school motto, **We Strive to Rise** (the English translation of Surgere Tentamus), which taps into our determination, and courage, and resilience, and hope. All things we need to draw upon now.

We have risen many times before. Our School was founded in 1913, and as a community, we have lived through so many significant events: two world wars, the Spanish Influenza, the fight for a woman's right to vote, the Great Depression, the Civil Rights era, the LA. Riots, September 11, and the #MeToo movement.

During the flu pandemic of 1918, Westridge students stayed home for eight weeks or more, just like now, while trying to keep up with their studies and nurse their loved ones back to health.

During both World Wars, students engaged in war work, including raising funds and making much needed surgical masks – things that parallel student efforts this spring and summer.

During the Civil Rights Era in the 1960s, while brutal fights were underway to stop school desegregation and the Pasadena community was roiling, Headmistress Libby Edmundson Herrick and the board of trustees approved a policy of non-discrimination and focused on increasing diversity at Westridge. The school's first African American student, Genna Rae McNeil of the Class of 1965, later reflected that the death of President Kennedy provided "the first

experience that truly bound Black and White, Jewish and Asian in community at Westridge,” and commented, “... our teachers and Ms. Edmundson (as she was known before she married), used the occasion as a true teaching moment when we were challenged to question our roles in restoring the nation to a society less fraught with vicious violence and hatred.”

This language sounds too familiar today. As a nation and a school, we are not where we thought we would be more than 50 years after the hard-won advances of the 1960s.

Indeed, though Westridge was founded upon a vision for gender equity, it is well documented today that women’s movements across the decades of U.S. history have often left women of color behind, and I fear that we have too. It is with great sadness that I acknowledge that racial inequity exists today at Westridge. This summer I had conversations with many Black/African American alumnae, and other community members of color, who told me of painful bias, prejudice, and racial trauma they experienced at Westridge. While difficult to hear, I was humbled by their courage to step forward.

Alumnae and students are asking us to make change and do better for students at Westridge today and in the future. To examine our practices, take action, and increase representation on our campus and in our curriculum to create a school where everyone is safe and valued for who they are. True change will take a community and long-term institutional commitment and we look forward to working together this year and beyond.

So, at this moment, August 26, 2020, **how do we strive to rise?**

We must strive to rise to the challenge of a school year that as of now, during COVID-19, is forcing us to learn and connect remotely. We must focus on academic excellence and social and emotional learning and connection.

We must strive to rise to work together, and commit to helping others – and with goodness, an attribute that has long been associated with who **we strive to be** at Westridge, encompassing all that it means to love, and embrace humanity.

We must strive to provide our newest students and families, particularly our fourth graders, the warmth and support that they need **to rise** and thrive at Westridge. And we need to encourage and engage each other, particularly our seniors, to make sure that we live in the here and now and make every moment as positive as possible.

And, we must strive to rise by examining who we are as institution, no matter how uncomfortable it may be. Are we really living up to our values and ideals?

How do racism and bias show up at Westridge and how can we confront them? Are we supporting all of our students not equally but equitably in the ways that they need to thrive? How will we hold ourselves accountable? What are we going to do to make systemic change and how will we know, if, and when, we have achieved it? Status quo is NOT an option.

We strive – and we rise. It is in the very DNA of our school and in the determination and commitment of those of us who hold our students lives and futures in our hands. By working together, we can as Jim Collins states in *Great by Choice*:

- Not merely react, but create
- Not merely survive but prevail
- Not merely succeed, but thrive

Together, we must promise that no matter how difficult the situation in which find ourselves – **we WILL strive to rise.**

Our school motto, “We Strive to Rise” has to be so much more than a refrain that appears in our school song. It should be a mantra that guides and challenge us, every day. And, in keeping with the closing line of our school song, our alma mater, it has to be for Westridge ONE and ALL!

This concludes our event this morning. Thank you for joining us today. We look forward to learning and growing together this year. And now – the Madrigals will close our Convocation singing *Surgere Tentamus*. Feel free to join along!

Resources:

- Collins, Jim and Hansen, Morten T. *Great By Choice: Uncertainty, Chaos and Luck – Why Some Thrive despite Them All*. Harper Collins, 2011.
- Scoble, Fran Norris. *Her Chosen Path: The Story of Mary Lowther Ranney*. Balcony Press, 2014.
- Scoble, Fran Norris. *Westridge School: A Centennial History*. Balcony Press, 2014.
- Westridge School Archives