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Founders' Day
15 February 2017
Introduction of Mona Hanna-Attisha
Jonathan D. Green

As President Jensen noted, Founder's Day is an opportunity for us to celebrate the establishment of Illinois Wesleyan, to honor the visionary leadership of our founders, to reflect upon how we can best strive to fulfill the aspirations they had for the university, and to consider how each successive generation of students might build upon that growing legacy. How are we expected to take on the mantle of incalculable responsibility referred to in the founders' vision, and how has that vision intersected with this year's theme of Women's Power, Women's Justice?

I fear that our tagline treatment of this theme may be desensitizing us to the primacy of these issues in our contemporary world. How have inequities in the status of women worldwide persisted into the 21st century. In last week's Eckley lecture, economist, Yana van der Meulen Rodgers showed us the progress women's earnings have made in recent decades, but that progress still leaves the mean earnings of women nearly a quarter behind men in the United States, a nation where the educational attainment of women is now meaningfully greater than men.

Illinois Wesleyan admitted its first female student, Hannah I. Schur in 1870 and hired its first female professor in 1873. In 1879, Marietta Brown Reed Shay became the first woman graduate of Illinois Wesleyan's law school, and I should note that she was at the top of her class. These were all progressive points of pride in our history, but over 140 years later, we still have significant male majorities in our administration and board, and among our faculty the average service load of women exceeds that of their male counterparts.

As Dr. King said on our campus, "We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go."

Women have exerted remarkable power in effecting social change, and in most of our communities, domestic and international, it is women

who hold our families together, and it is women who perform countless acts of uncelebrated heroism to keep our communities moving slowly forward toward conditions of social equality and fundamental human justice.

But what does it mean to have a just society?

The great Roman orator, Cicero declared, “The foundations of justice are that no one should suffer wrong; then, that the public good be promoted.” In other words, justice cannot be the product of a Machiavellian compromise that allows us to ignore the rights of some to promote the status of others, or as Coretta Scott King stated “Freedom and justice cannot be parceled out in pieces to suit political convenience. I don't believe you can stand for freedom for one group of people and deny it to others.”¹

Throughout history, some people in power have misjudged the consequences of supporting a two-tiered or multi-tiered society that values privilege over equality and ignorance over justice. How many times can we as educated citizens allow people in positions of power to threaten the rights of our neighbors because of where they were born? How many times can we allow people in positions of leadership to devalue our neighbors based upon their race, ethnicity, or faith? How many times can we allow those in power to jeopardize the rights of our neighbors based upon their sexual orientation? And how many times can we allow leaders, or anyone to demean our neighbors based upon their gender?

As Frederick Douglass wrote, “The American people have this lesson to learn: That where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organized conspiracy to oppress, rob, and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe.”²

¹ remarks by CORETTA SCOTT KING at the Atlanta grave site of her late husband, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on June 30 1993, as excerpted in *the LA Times*, 11 July 1993.

² “*Southern Barbarism*,” speech on the occasion of the Twenty-Fourth Anniversary of Emancipation in the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., April 16, 1886.

As a people, we have often failed to learn the lessons of our history, but we have the ability to be that change we wish to see in the world. We must be willing to speak truth to power. As Sojourner Truth appropriately said, "Truth is powerful, and it pervades." There are no alternate truths, but it is truth that gives us the power to achieve justice.

There is no better confirmation of this than the work of today's speaker who has quickly become an exemplar of speaking truth to power as an advocate for those whose voices could not be heard.

In a press conference in September 2015, Mona Hanna-Attisha announced that blood lead levels in the children in Flint Michigan had doubled after the water source had been switched from the Detroit River to the Flint River in 2014.

Dr. Hanna-Attisha sought data from the State of Michigan, and when she did not receive them undertook her own research using electronic medical records. Because there were critical health implications, she took a significant career risk and held the aforementioned press conference before her research had been peer reviewed. In the face of strong opposition from environmental and medical leaders in Michigan, Dr. Hanna-Attisha maintained her position, which was soon confirmed by other research. Her courage and perseverance has led to significant efforts to mitigate the effects of lead exposure to the inhabitants of Flint.

More recently, Dr. Hanna-Attisha has become a leading voice in the effort to curtail the marginalization of immigrant populations and international students in the United States. As a university proud to have over 10% of its students and faculty from other countries, we are grateful for these efforts. Please join me in welcoming a woman who has sought justice through the power of absolute truths, Dr. Hanna-Attisha.