

Speech to National Council of Negro Women

By Condoleezza Rice

I could not be more honored than to receive the Bethune Award because I feel a great kinship with Mary McLeod Bethune, and I think we all do. I was reading a little bit of her biography in recent days and it's extraordinary. It's extraordinary to think that at the time that Dr. Bethune lived, she was asked by a president of the United States to go to Liberia, in 1952, on a diplomatic mission. It's extraordinary that she was invited to the White House in 1928. It's extraordinary that a young, black woman from South Carolina could found a college and be its president for almost four decades. It's extraordinary, not because she wasn't talented enough to do it, but because she lived and toiled at a time when to do that as an African American woman was extraordinary.

I also feel a kinship with her because I've learned that she collected miniature elephants. She must have been a Republican.

I also feel, of course, a great, great kinship with this wonderful organization. It's been a part of our lives and a part of our histories from the time that any of us could remember. It is an organization that stands for the best in America because it stands for opportunity, and it stands for hope, and it stands for belief. It stands for everything that it really means to be American. It also stands for the tremendous gains that we as African Americans, and African American women, have made in these many years. But those gains would not have been possible without organizations like this in our lives. And so let me ask you to join me in thanking you, this great organization, for the long years of service to African Americans, and African American women. Thank you.

I also feel a great kinship to Dr. Bethune and to this organization because we share a passion for education. There is no more important element for the United States of America than the promise of education. I'm a living example of what education can mean, because it goes back a long way in my family. I very often tell people that I should have been able to accomplish what I accomplished because I had grandparents and parents who understood the value of education.

Maybe some of you've heard me tell the story of Granddaddy Rice, a poor sharecropper's son in Ewtah – that's E-W-T-A-H - Alabama, who, somehow, in about 1919 decided he was going to get book learning. And so, he asked people who came through how a colored man could get to college. And they said to him, "Well you see there's this college not too far away from here called Stillman College, and if you could get there, they take colored men into college." And so, he saved up his cotton and he went off to Tuscaloosa, Alabama to go to college. He made it through his first year having paid for it with his cotton, but the second year he didn't have any more cotton, and they came, and they asked him for tuition. And he said, "Well you see the problem is, I don't have any money." And they said, "Well, you'll have to leave." So, he thought rather quickly, and he said, "Well how are those

boys going to college?" And they said, "Well, you see, they have what's called a scholarship and if you wanted to be a Presbyterian minister then you could have a scholarship too." And Granddaddy Rice said, "You know, that's exactly what I had in mind. and my family has been Presbyterian, and it has been college-educated ever since.

My grandfather understood something, and so did my grandmother and my mother's parents, and that is that higher education, if you can attain it, is transforming. You may come from a poor family, you may come from a rural family, you may be first-generation college-educated, but once you are college-educated, the most important thing about you, in many ways, is that you're a college graduate and you are transformed. And I have to tell you that if I have a concern at all today in America, it is that we have got to find a way to pass on that promise to children, no matter what their circumstances, because it's just got to be the case in America that it does not matter where you came from, it only matters where you're going.

I used to love to stand in front of a class at Stanford University, because at Stanford University, one of the finest universities in America, there was always some kid who, of course, was a fourth-generation Stanford legatee. But you know what? He or she was sitting right next to a kid who was an itinerant farm worker's son, or a daughter of a migrant, or maybe a kid from the inner city. Because, somehow, these kids were getting a good enough education to come and study side-by-side at Stanford University and be transformed together. But we have a hard job ahead of us if that promise is going to continue to be fulfilled. We've got an educational system that is, frankly, not living up to the demands of today to educate our children.

I know that this conference talks about leaving no one behind. President Bush has talked about leaving no child behind. America has got to recommit to precisely that sentiment because we will not be who we are if it is not true that you are able to do whatever your talents can allow you to do – that you are not somehow constrained and hemmed in by where you started.

Now, there's another message that we need to deliver to our kids. It's that educational excellence is key, but so are limitless educational horizons.

You know, I didn't start out to be a Russian specialist. I'm not Russian, in case you haven't noticed. [laughter] And so I went to college to be a concert pianist. I could read music before I could read. But, about my sophomore year in college, I started to encounter those kids who could play from sight everything that it had taken me all year to learn. And I thought, I'm in trouble. I'm not going to end up playing at Carnegie Hall, I'm going to end up playing in a piano bar, or teaching 13-year-olds to murder Beethoven, or maybe playing at Nordstrom, but I'm not going to play Carnegie Hall. And so, I went home and had that conversation with my parents:

"Mom and Dad, I'm changing my major."

"To what are you changing your major?"

"I don't know."

"You are going to wind up a waitress at Howard Johnson's because you don't know what you want to do with your life."

"Well after all it is my life."

"Well after all it is our money."

And after this little conversation my parents and I decided that I only had two years to finish college. I was already now a junior in college. And so, I wandered the wilderness looking for a major. And, fortunately, in the spring quarter of my junior year, I wandered into a course in international politics taught by a Soviet specialist – taught by a man named Joseph Korbel, Madeleine Albright's father. And suddenly, I'd found love. People say, "Why are you interested in Russia?" It's like love. I'd suddenly found my passion. And it never occurred to me to ask why a black woman from Birmingham; Alabama might want to do that.

And, so, I studied Russia. And I studied Russian. And I became proficient at what I did, and I went off to teach. And President Bush, the first, asked me to come and be his specialist for Soviet affairs. And, in June 1990, I found myself in a helicopter taking off with Mikhail Gorbachev, Raisa Gorbachyova, me and the Secret Service, and I thought to myself, "I'm really glad I changed my major."

For me, the passion came in something quite unusual. We must tell our kids, too, that it's okay for your passion to come in something that's not expected of you. If you can be excellent at something, if you love something, go and do it. And then provide them the education to do so. That, in many ways, is our most important value as Americans, but you know what? It's a universal value.

We're seeing it today in Afghanistan, where women are throwing off their burqas. But that's not really what they're talking about. They're talking about re-entering colleges, and going back to work as doctors, and educating their daughters for the first time since the Taliban came to power. That's the power of this value – that people ought to be able to attain whatever they can attain.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it was the way that Mary McLeod Bethune believed, it has been the way that this great organization has believed, it is what we, as Americans, believe.

I want to thank you for the honor of being with you, of now carrying an award that carries the name of one of the great pioneers of our people, and of our country. I want to thank you again, Dr. Height, for being here with me. May God bless you and God bless America.