

The following are excerpts from Head of School Ann Pollina's remarks at Westover's Opening Convocation:

On my first trip to Rwanda, I was struck by the large posters I saw on the street. The posters were dominated by the face of a beautiful young girl, aged about 12. The text was simple and chilling. It read: "No Sex, No School --that's the choice I face. I know this makes me vulnerable to HIV, but many of us can only afford to go to school by allowing our bodies to be used. This has to change. Equality for women helps fight AIDS."

I remembered this when I read in the August 23<sup>rd</sup> issue of the New York Times magazine of an encounter in Swaziland. "I met eyes with a 16-year-old named Mbali...I offered her a packet of crackers, which she ripped open with her teeth. After wolfing them down, she looked at me and said, 'I hate having sex.' Her parents were dead; she was unable to pay her school fees, ..., and now, like many of the girls, she was a runaway. ... I asked her what she needed most. 'Someplace safe', she said. 'Someplace to be a girl.' ...[the author comments] How strange. How simple."

The same magazine contains the story of Shamsia, a 17-year old from Afghanistan. "Even before the men with acid came, the Mirwais Mena School for Girls (on the outskirts of Kandahar) was surrounded by enemies....The area around [the school] is the Taliban heartland. Teaching girls to read was not something that would escape their notice. Across the country, the Taliban have made the destruction of schools, particularly schools for girls, a hallmark of their war....The attackers appeared in the morning on Nov. 12 of last year, as the girls were walking to school. They wore masks. ... Shamsia Husseini and her sister, Atifa, were walking along the highway when they spotted the men on the motorbikes. ...through the mask [the man] asked a strange question. 'Are you going to school?' The masked man pulled the scarf away from Shamsia's face and, with his other hand, pumped the trigger on his spray gun. Shamsia felt as if her face and eyes were on fire." Yet after months of healing, Shamsia was back in school. "My parents, [who were both illiterate], told me to keep coming to school, even if I am killed," Shamsia said.

And I also want you to meet Tererai, from Zimbabwe. "As a child Tererai did not get much formal education, partly because she was a girl and was expected to do household chores. ...Her father would say 'Let's send our sons to school, because they will be the breadwinners.' Tererai's brother, Tinashe, was forced to go to school where he was an indifferent student. Tererai pleaded to be allowed to attend,

but she wasn't permitted to do so. Tinashe brought his books home every afternoon, and Tererai poured over them and taught herself to read and write. Soon she was doing her brother's homework every evening. The teacher grew puzzled, for Tinashe was a poor student in class, but always handed in exemplary homework. Finally, the teacher noticed that the handwriting was different for homework and for class assignments...[He] went to the father, told him that Tererai was a prodigy and begged that she be allowed to attend school. After much argument, the father allowed Tererai to attend school for a couple of terms, but married her off at about age 11."

Sobering readings for our first day, and I'm sure you see obvious lessons here. – Aren't we lucky; for us school is a right; we can attend it without fear; we have here someplace safe, someplace to be a girl. Let's make sure we recognize our privilege and make the most of all opportunities. If these messages occurred to you, good. They are important, but not my deeper purpose in reading you those stories.

I wanted you to hear those stories because I want to challenge all of us to remember that Shamsia, Tererai and Mbali are our sisters. We are here because what the world needs more than anything are women determined and committed to helping ALL their sisters to thrive. You are here at Westover to learn how to change the world; and improving the lot of the women and girls of this world will be key.

Larry Summers, now President Obama's economic advisor:" Investment in girls' education may well be the highest return investment in the developing world." And there is reason to believe that, increasingly, it is women who are taking the lead, who are supporting the philanthropies that aid women and children - businesswomen who create microloan opportunities that feed women and children in Asia; women in education who build coalitions to start schools for girls in Africa; women doctors who create free clinics and staff them in Haiti.

Tomorrow, you need to be those women. Today I'm reminding us that we are building an army in our classrooms, sportsfields and studios –a powerful group of young women who can be part of the solution to the desperate plight of many of their sisters world wide.

Sound overwhelming? Of course it does – many of you are still worrying about whether or not you bought the right notebooks, or packed the right clothes. You are wondering if you will make varsity, or if you were crazy to sign up for three AP's. How do you become humanitarians and change agents? That's our job. By first insisting that you honor and respect each other and find ways to help every

student here to thrive, we prepare you to face the world believing that it is natural to think about the lives of those around you. Our insistence that you leave at the door any pettiness, craving for gossip and bullying behavior, our determination that those who wield power do so responsibly and respectfully, our requirement that all of you give service to the school and to the wider community – these have a deeper purpose than you can imagine. That purpose is to help you to build your love for humanity and your sensitivity for the needs of others. Much of what we do to achieve this purpose will be invisible, but it will always be there.

Mr. Hungerford has spoken insightfully on several occasions about the stunning stone walls that surround our school. Many of you from New England will have seen pastures and woodlands with old stone walls that are derelict and crumbling. Yet the Westover stone walls have stood steadfastly, requiring almost no maintenance, for a full hundred years. What's the secret? It is simple but important - those walls have as much stone underground as they have height above ground; they are built on a deep invisible foundation that keeps them stable, effective and beautiful.

We are asking great things of you, and we arm you to achieve them by giving you an invisible and deep foundation. Your foundation is academic - your sensitivity to literature, logical approach to problem solving and understanding of the intricacies of science. You will leave with perspective from history, aesthetics from art, strength and discipline from athletics, cultural connection from language; never doubt that those skills will be important in unexpected ways. Your groundwork will also be formed of messages of care and community. You will not only learn to develop a strong sense of self, but to achieve an understanding of when self-interest must yield to common good. Your underpinnings will be access to leadership and power and more importantly, how to use it. You will harness the advantages of technology without losing sight of the fact that the virtual world pales before the beauty of the natural world and that your online connections will never replace a hug in the hallway.

Our work here, we hope, will help you to celebrate the talents and skills women add to our world, to develop the strength and fearlessness to embrace the plight of your sisters across the globe, and in small ways and large, change their lives and our world for the better. President Obama said it this way: "Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek."