

Below is the text of the speech that Pat Stocker, President of the Bethesda-Chevy Chase AAUW Branch, made at the National Conference for College Women Student Leaders in May 2022. The speech was given because of her selection as Maryland AAUW's Woman of Distinction for 2022. She would be grateful for your thoughts on the speech – and your thoughts on women who have influenced you in your life. Thanks!

LESSONS FROM OUR FOREMOTHERS

By Pat Stocker, Maryland AAUW 2022 Woman of Distinction

National Conference for College Women Student Leaders (NCCWSL)

May 26, 2022

Introduction made by Kate Campbell Stevenson

Thank you, Kate, for those kind words. I am honored to be with you today as part of your NCCWSL experience. I hope you have made new friends, learned something about yourself and your leadership, and had fun as well! As Kate mentioned, I was born and raised in North Dakota, and like all of us gathered here today, my upbringing had a profound impact on who I am today. I will guess that a few of you here may be from colleges in North Dakota, and perhaps a few others have visited the state – but not many, I fear. North Dakota is the least visited of all 50 states. There are more cattle there than people. And it was really cold in the winter. Except for Alaska, it's the coldest state in the country. I remember that sometimes it would be below zero – Fahrenheit, not centigrade! – for weeks. Temperatures are below zero an average of 65 days a year in the northern part of the state. You have to be hearty to live in North Dakota! Growing up there really made people aware of their environment – of working hard – and of learning to rely on each other. But in the summer there also were beautiful, huge fields of sunflowers – all facing the same direction toward the sun. I know that whether you were raised in a big city or a rural area or a historic area, you have the same sense that you are a different person because of that.

Before I get too far into my remarks, I want to ask each one of you to think of one woman who made a BIG difference to you. It could be a friend, a teacher, a coach, a mother – or even someone you didn't know, like Oprah Winfrey or Michelle Obama. Please jot the name down – I'm going to come back to this later.

When I look at the women who influenced me – even inspired me – I realize that I learned important life lessons from each of them.

For me, the most important woman in my life was my mother, Irene Dodge. She was the most self-confident person I knew – and that was surprising to me because she had been an abused child and her father was the town drunk. Her mother used to yell at her – “I hate you! I wish you'd never been born.” I would think this would ruin a child's self-image forever. I often asked her about this, because she had none of the negative self-images that you might predict. She recalled exactly when she overcame this. She was 8 years old when she said, “I decided that it wasn't my fault.” She was a wonderful mother herself – I'd sometimes ask her if she thought what her mother would do, then do the opposite! – and I developed my own self confidence with her example. The important life lesson I learned from her was that **YOU DECIDE WHO YOU ARE. YOU ARE NOT DEFINED BY WHAT OTHER PEOPLE THINK.** I hope all of us can learn that lesson.

Another woman who had a major impact on me was Catherine Cater. You won't know that name, but she was a college professor of mine at North Dakota State University. An

African American woman, she stood out in our community of mostly Norwegian and Swedish settlers. I took every class she taught. She would take my often-naïve thoughts or beginnings of ideas and help me believe in strengths that I didn't know I had. She helped me see that I could aspire to more than I had thought, and as I went on to my graduate education, she still inspired me. The important life lesson I learned from her was that YOU HAVE MORE CAPABILITIES THAN YOU REALIZE. YOU CAN ASPIRE TO MORE.

When I think of Eleanor Roosevelt, a woman who died before I had any personal knowledge of her, I was inspired as well. Eleanor Roosevelt was not a beautiful woman. She was painfully shy and gawky. She had a high pitched, squeaky voice which she thought was her worst attribute – and worked on strengthening her voice so that she could be more effective. And she found herself in the position of standing up for what was important, even if it was unpopular. She took the influence she had, and with what I'm sure was great insecurity, she raised her voice to stand up for others. The important life lesson I learned from her was that WHATEVER YOUR WEAKNESSES, USE YOUR VOICE TO INFLUENCE OTHERS.

And finally, I think of Madeleine Albright. I believe it was just over a month ago that her funeral was held, but that was a reminder of her importance to me – and to so many women. An immigrant to the US from Prague at 11 years old, she became the first women secretary of state – a single mom with three daughters – a tiny woman, not even five feet tall. Yet she became a giant in the eyes of others – one of the most powerful people in the world. She became a true symbol for women using their power to influence others by speaking up, even when she disagreed with other world leaders. One of her quotes I most appreciate is “Silence may be golden, but it won't win many arguments!” Don't be hesitant to speak up. She had a real bias for action. It was said of her that she was in a hurry to do good, and she spent her entire life lifting up others. Another of her famous quotes is even more important to me: “There is a special place in hell for women who don't support other women.” This was quoted at her recent funeral – and it's a reminder to all of us on our Zoom screens throughout the country today. As women, we need to support each other.

So, I leave you with these lessons from those who influenced me – my mentors, my friends:

From my mother – YOU ARE NOT DEFINED BY YOUR PAST. IT MAY SHAPE YOUR THINKING, BUT YOU DETERMINE YOUR WORTH.

From Dr. Cater – YOU HAVE MORE CAPABILITIES THAN YOU REALIZE. YOU CAN ASPIRE TO MORE.

From Eleanor Roosevelt – WHATEVER YOUR WEAKNESSES, USE YOUR VOICE TO INFLUENCE OTHERS.

And from Madeleine Albright – SPEAK UP! SILENCE IS NOT GOLDEN and REMEMBER TO STAND UP FOR OTHER WOMEN.

I have shared how some important women in my life have shaped me. I hope you will go back to that woman whom you identified earlier in my comments and write down the major lessons you learned from her. (pause)

I fear our time is up. You have amazing opportunities – you may create jobs that don't even exist today. You can make a difference, whether it's for one person, for a community, for our country or even for the world. We are counting on you because we know our future is not only in your hands, but that you can make this world better. You

stand on the shoulders of the women we've talked about today. It is now your chance to be the shoulders for the women who follow you. Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today! My best wishes to all of you.