



“Attention Must be Paid”

Remarks at the Celebration of the Opening of the Paul Cuffee High School

7 October 2010 by Michael C. Obel-Omia

“Keep your face always toward the sunshine - and shadows will fall behind you” Walt Whitman

It is an honor to be here this afternoon among so many friends and well-wishers. I chose to open with these words from Walt Whitman, because you, the men and women here, have chosen to face toward the sunshine, have believed that this high school is possible, and have allowed the shadows to fall behind us. We stand here because you have believed in Paul Cuffee. We stand here because you have shared your talent, your time, and your treasure with us, and because you have believed, we are able to uplift the Youth of Providence. Thank you for your support, thank you for believing in us.

I am so grateful to be here, too, and what I have said to many is what I want to say to you few now: I know and I am grateful that I am drinking from wells that I did not dig. You are the men and women who rolled up your sleeves, grasped those shovels, and dug into the earth, creating these deep wells from which now I drink. I am not the only one drinking deeply; all these students are as well, and all of them are grateful to you for digging these wells and providing us with fresh water. Thank you for your support, thank you for giving us a future.

Recently, my wife and I took in a production of Camelot at Trinity Repertory Theatre. One of the themes of the musical is the idea that we will build a new world, a paradise where humanity will settle its differences with laws, not with swords. Camelot, at its best, will be, as Christ noted, “the light of the world. A city set on a hill [that] cannot be hidden;” (Matthew 5:14). My wife and I enjoyed the musical very much, but as I watched, my mind wandered to Paul Cuffee and thought about this moment: this moment when we celebrate the tremendous vision of you here congregated while we continue to build and imagine this school. We love this space, and we are grateful for it. I have spent a number of days here, listening in on classes on The Crucible, relearning how to do algebraic equations, and remembering how plates shifting cause earthquakes.

Yesterday, after I shared these lessons here, I traveled to the Rhode Island Foundation to hear a discussion on what makes good teaching. The panel consisted of a number of thoughtful speakers including Commissioner Deborah Gist. When she was asked what makes a good teacher she opined, “The teacher must care about the student, she must know her subject and express enthusiasm about it, she must inspire her charges, cajoling them, if she must, and she must set high standards for the students.” In an ideal world, in Camelot, that happens, but it happens not enough. Here at Paul Cuffee School, based on my observations, I see Aaron and Tom and Nora and Tom and Pam and Tina and all the support teachers knowing and loving their students, showing joy in their subjects, inspiring these children, and holding them to exceptionally high standards. In sum, great learning occurs here daily, and we who are here are blessed to witness these young teachers eagerly and determinedly igniting the flame of learning in our students. It is a joyful enterprise.

Not every day is perfect, but every day has that perfect moment. On Tuesday when I arrived, I cheerfully looked at Becky and asked, “What do you need from me today,” and she responded, “I need your meanest face!” After six weeks of pushing the students, the teachers were tired and the students were tired of being nudged, so they pushed back a bit. It was an exhausting day, and, at times, dispiriting—oh, my God, how are

we going to share this place with our friends on Thursday; maybe a hurricane will hit!—but it finished beautifully with six students who met me in the library to discuss preparations for this day. As I listened to them describe what they love about this place and how this place is improving their lives, my heart swelled, and I was reminded why we work so hard every day: to give our students a chance at success, to make their lives greater.

Working with students daily, as I reminded potential teachers last night in a master's class at Johnson and Wales University, is exhausting. One of the reasons it is exhausting is that the students are growing and changing so much. They do push back because they seek to find their identity and place in their world. They want to know where the boundaries are and how close to the sun they can fly before their wings melt and they are sent straight to the ocean. Keeping children on an even keel and headed in the right direction takes special men and women, ones who unabashedly love children and set high standards for them, and I think that we have found them. But we need to support them.

One of our challenges going forward is to give all our faculty, the ones in the elementary school, the ones in the middle school, and the ones here, access to one another, so that they can learn from one another. Becky, Nell, Michelle, and Suzie burn up our telephone lines talking when they should be looking one another in the eye and sharing common philosophies on how to address problems and thinking about ways to prepare our students for their futures. Our students, the ones in the elementary school and the middle school and the high school, need access to one another, so that the older ones model active learning for the young ones, and the young ones remind the older students about joy; they will also assist the older students in learning how to be sympathetic and sweet, and the older ones will teach the younger students how to lead and to serve a community.

As much as we appreciate this beautiful space, and we do, we would appreciate even more being together on one campus. I am unsure if it will be any less exhausting for the teachers, but I am confident that it will improve our ability to support one another and educate our children. Our teachers need to be together to hear one another, to praise one another, to learn from one another, to suggest ideas to one another, to share best practices with one another, to see one another in action, to laugh with one another, to know one another. Having one campus is our dream, because we need to connect with one another and to inspire one another.

Earlier this week I saw a tremendous production of *Death of a Salesman* with Christopher Lloyd as Willy Lowman. When Linda angrily scolds her children, Biff and Happy, she says, "Attention must be paid." Her words rang true with me, as we look to improve the lives of the children in the city. Many of you in this room knew that attention must be paid, and you worked hard to help realize this place, this dream. Attention must still be paid, because we need to embrace the urgency of the situation. Our children desperately need us to be at our best every day, because without us, they have no future.

Camelot, according to Arthurian scholar Norris Lacy, "located no where in particular, can be anywhere." In spite of the fact that we are far from finished, we continue to keep our faces toward the sunshine, hopeful that we can continue to uplift Providence Youth. The good work that we have accomplished here, which by no means is finished, leads me to believe that we have formed anew Camelot here in Providence. Finally, let me finish with words we have all heard before from Henry Adams: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." It is that belief that nourishes us and feeds us daily. So thank you for keeping your face towards the sun, thank you for supporting us, and thank you for helping us affect eternity. Know that we are not done, no, we are not satisfied; we will continue to improve, to grow, and to affect eternity, but in the interim, we are grateful to you for your support of and belief in us.