

Wheelock College's Passion for Action Award Dinner

JFK Library, November 16, 2011

“What is *Your* Sentence?”

Thank you, Jackie, for your warm welcome and for inviting me to celebrate with you so many extraordinary leaders -- all who share a **Passion for Action *to improve the lives of children and families***. I have had the pleasure of joining you and your students at an **all-school forum** at Wheelock reflecting on the ramifications of the horrible Haitian earthquake. More recently I came **to hear the stories** of several of your Passion for Action Scholars. They embody **Passion with Purpose. Action with Heart**. Wait until you all hear them tonight!

We have no shortage of good-hearted, generous and committed citizens. Just two months ago the local newspaper of *Salem, Oregon* chronicled a **spontaneous explosion of good**

will. A customer enjoying breakfast at an **Oregon Diner** signaled to his server to pay the tab for two **Oregon National Guardsmen** seated nearby. "Those guardsmen then picked up the tab for another table... and those guests did the same for another... until 'People were just pointing at tables,'" nearly 20 times over... *all the way until closing time!* Salem experienced an outbreak of contagious generosity, because those who are surrounded by givers give themselves. It just took a catalyst, one unassuming person, acting on instinct, to get the ball rolling.

On a much larger scale we witnessed a spontaneous explosion of generosity in the aftermath of the **Haitian earthquake**, when half of American families responded. One out of every two gifts received were sent via "**text message**," by individuals responding on the spot -- almost without thinking -- to a television prompt. We are wired to act generously.

Like the citizens at the Oregon Diner, we are here tonight, honoring with our small gestures, the **catalytic service** of Wheelock's finest students and their faculty mentors.

We all can be moved to spontaneous or thoughtful acts of service or generosity, but it takes a magnified Passion for Action-- an **irrepressible Drive** -- to make a difference for others on a large scale. It takes the **inability to sleep** at night until a system is changed to qualify as what **Barbara Metzler** has described as a "**Passionary**." Passionaries -- like **Carol Johnson** and **Linda Nathan** -- are passionately and com-passionately **Driven** towards a vision of a greater good for all. As catalysts they instigate a disruptive innovation that makes the impossible real. Thank you, **Carol and Linda**, for embodying the words of **Lucy Wheelock**: for "**being brave enough to dare**" to create public schools where thousands of young people are **discovering their passions** and prepare for **creative** and fulfilling futures.

What is it that creates this **unquenchable Drive** in a leader or student? **Daniel H. Pink**, in his book Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us, turns traditional wisdom about human motivation on its head. We are not motivated principally by our **biological urges**, not by **extrinsic** rewards and punishments, argues Pink, but rather **by intrinsic needs**: namely, by the desire for **Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose**.

How does Wheelock College create the conditions for its Passion for Action Scholars to pursue Autonomy, Mastery and Purpose? As you have read in their stirring profiles, they come here with "**Fire,**" a **fire to serve**. Wheelock's job is to give them enough **Autonomy** to make meaningful, **real-world choices** between service placements in **New Orleans, Ghana, Guatemala**, and in **state and national government** here. When students are self-directed, choosing their own goals and venues for learning, they own the learning process, and **Drive** takes the

wheel! Wheelock assists them in **developing self-awareness** and in defining their **personal values** in the process.

Wheelock creates **Drive** in its students by helping them achieve **Mastery** -- the sense of **competence** that occurs when one feels totally in "flow," becoming better and better at something that really matters. A sense of Mastery requires **feedback** -- and so Wheelock has created the **learning cohort** -- a **collaborative leadership development group** that helps its scholars reflect together on their experiences, asking, "Where could I improve? What other supports would be helpful?"

Wheelock **intensifies Drive** in its Passion for Action Scholars by helping them **refine their mission**, their **Purpose** -- their reason for being and doing. They **examine systems**, informed by their coursework, illuminated by their field studies, and via the lens of their **personal experiences**. From all three of these vantage points, they **define the social change they seek**

to achieve in the world. Yet, no vantage point is more critical to **sustaining *Drive over a lifetime***, I believe, than the personal. And the stories I have heard from Wheelock students confirm that.

Monique Brunner grew up in a Boston neighborhood attending the funerals of child victims of gang violence. Inspired by outrage and grief, she worked with the Teen Empowerment Program to organize a Youth Peace Summit. After service in New Orleans and Ghana, with a double major in *Human Development and Juvenile Justice*, she will pursue graduate studies to **keep other youth from losing their lives in her community.**

Lyonel Traversiere's parents emigrated from **Haiti** and raised their children in Mattapan. He has witnessed too many of their hardships on his behalf and pledges that their sacrifices will not be in vain. Studying *Human Growth and Development*,

mentored by the Passion for Action program, Lyonel plans to do **service in Haiti** and **bring gifts of affection, safety and motivation to young people in Boston.**

Lisa Kriszun, a native of Germany is all the more dedicated to **fostering cross-cultural understanding** and **pursuing policy change** after serving at **Safe Passage**, a holistic educational program started by a Wheelock alumna, for children raised in the trash dump of Guatemala City. Hearing Lisa passionately describe this searing experience, I could tell it will be one that will never leave her. I know why, as I have been to the **city dump of Quito, Ecuador**, a place where children are born in cardboard boxes and where enormous dump trucks roll over children too small to be seen.

My first trip to **Latin America** was in 1993. Jim and I were invited by friends to join them on a trekking and climbing expedition in Peru. Hiking through eucalyptus groves on remote

Andean hillsides, we encountered potato farmers, llama herders, and women spinning wool while walking, chatting and carrying babies in colorful shawls on their backs. Despite the placid scene, I discovered it was also a **place of pain and poverty**.

One evening at dusk in the mountain city of Huaraz, a woman with flopping black braids, multi-layered wool skirts, and a wide-brimmed felt hat shuffled hastily towards me. Tugging at her listless little daughter, she touched me and pleaded, "*Tomale. Su hija. Por favor.... Take her. Your daughter. Please.*" I read her desperation. I presumed her hunger. I shook my head, stunned at her offer.

The next morning as our crew prepared to leave I spied a grandmother and child – perhaps the mother, because women's faces become so chiseled in the harsh, high-altitude climate. She was hunched in the dirt propped up by the wall of our lodging. Nestled under her skirts was a toddler boy, motionless,

staring. I walked closer. *"Tomale. America. Por favor.... Take him. America. Please."*

I remember sobbing as we drove away, not knowing why, but determined to return and do something about the poverty-induced desperation I had experienced -- the **desperation that would lead a mother to hand her child to a total stranger like me.**

Having already adopted a blond-haired baby boy from Boston, Jim and I returned over the next three years to adopt **three beautiful little girls** from the Andean region of Ecuador. On each visit we saw how grinding poverty stunts children's physical, intellectual, and social development. We experienced the emotional hunger of children who grow up in orphanages. We imagined the scars on the hearts of the parents who couldn't keep their sons and daughters.

This is the primal experience that ***Drives*** me to try to **end global poverty -- the story that gives my life purpose**. These are the images I wake up to each morning, in the faces of Andean women in sepia-toned watercolors that hang in my bedroom -- **the brave and sacrificial mothers of my Ecuadorian daughters**.

To keep going day in day out in pursuit of a vision, one must make it **not merely analytical but personal**, knowing how one's **story** intersects with that vision. Equally important is to **distill one's story to a sentence** -- to a mantra -- to a guiding principle that you can pull from your pocket and recite to yourself when you are exhausted or discouraged. It must be BIG, so big that you will never *fully* achieve it; so BIG you would be embarrassed for anyone else to hear it; but succinct enough, SMALL enough to fit in your pocket.

Being in this incredibly august setting reminds me that one day in 1962, **Claire Booth Luce**, a playwright and a Republican, had advice for **President Kennedy**. Worried that his policy objectives were too diffuse to be achievable or memorable, she bravely said,

"A great man is a sentence. 'He preserved the union and freed the slaves....or... He lifted us out of a great Depression and helped to win a World War.' A great man is a sentence. What is yours, Mr. President?"

President Kennedy was challenged to **condense his life's mission to words ending in one period**. That was prescient advice, because he had less than three years to make them real.

What is YOUR sentence? I have hung onto my sentence for eighteen years. Our Wheelock Passion for Action Scholars

are developing theirs. **What is YOUR sentence that drives YOU to change the world?**

Tonight, dare I say, we are here at the **JFK Diner!** The community is **gathered in the presence of bravery**, of those who have served, of those who have transformed their schools, their neighborhoods, and our world. We're here with those who are **Driven** to change the world for this and the next generation of families and children. **How will we honor these heroes?** What will we **give**? How will we **bravely** link our visions -- **our sentences** -- our **Drive** with theirs? As Wheelock's founder said, ***"Be brave, for there is much to dare."***

Thank you for the privilege of celebrating with our **Emerging High School Leaders**, the **Wheelock Passion for Action Scholars**, and our **Passionary** role models, **Linda Nathan** and **Carol Johnson**. Thank you.