

NEA President Becky Pringle's Remarks

Honoring Dr. Mary Hatwood Futrell

Recipient of the James A. Kelly Award for Advancing Accomplished Teaching

November 6, 2020

For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a teacher. From the time I forced my two sisters to play school on the front steps of our North Philly home, to the time I stepped into my first classroom, full of wide-eyed enthusiasm. A sense of hope and promise. I had no idea that public education would become a “notion at risk.”

As more and more people outside of education began asserting themselves into the direction of public education, I turned to my union to find a place where I could find power and influence in my profession, my school, my classroom.

I was encouraged by then president, Mary Hatwood Futrell who wrote:

“Along with thousands of my teaching colleagues throughout the United States, I have watched, listened, and responded to the avalanche of education reform reports that have emerged during the 1980s. From the unique perspective of both classroom teacher and representative of the 1.9 million members of the National Education Association, much of what I have witnessed causes me to worry.

What concerns me is the absence within the educational community itself of any real consensus on some professional issues and objectives that are essential to education reform. I am concerned that unless educators themselves assume the right and responsibility for establishing high, meaningful standards for preparation, entry, and practice, the governance of our profession will remain the province of legislators, bureaucrats, and other non-educators. I am concerned that even where we have succeeded in creating credible standards, we seem to lack the collective will to insist that they be adhered to.”

Ending with Rabbi Hillel's question: “If not us, who? If not now, when?”

Mary issued that challenge in 1986. It's what fueled her determination to champion the creation of the National Board in 1987. And I “met” her (on the big screen) in 1989 at my first Representative Assembly. It was her last. But I will never forget the sense of pride and power

she instilled in me with her words. She continued to challenge NEA at that convention to live into its purpose, to stand in its power, to take on our responsibility to own our profession...to lead. Many, many tears were shed at that RA. From the 1st day to the last, we made sure we had our box of tissues to dry our eyes that overflowed because we knew we were witnessing greatness. That this incredible woman believed in us; believed in our ability and responsibility as professionals and as a union to transform teaching and learning. She left us a legacy, that now as president I have the honor and privilege to continue. I asked Mary to have lunch with me last year, as I embarked on running for NEA president. I wanted to pick her brain – learn at her feet; ask her questions about what she had accomplished, and what the NEA yet needed to achieve. I brought a notebook so I could capture her wisdom (insights that guide me to this day). What Mary doesn't know, is that after I dropped her off at her home, the waterworks again came. The tears this time came because of the deep sense of appreciation that I had been so blessed to have this role model (who I was too afraid to talk to when she sat with VEA on the steps right beside PSEA where I was sitting within arms' length of her); and now, this icon and mentor had so generously shared her experiences and ideas; her counsel and her brilliance, and most importantly...her encouragement. Mary's dedication to the profession of teaching certainly has earned her the James Kelly award. But she deserves so much more. The National Board, the NEA, and this black girl from North Philly owes her our gratitude, our highest praise, and our enduring devotion. Thank you, Mary.