

TARIK ODUNO – OPPORTUNITY, RESPONSIBILITY AND CHALLENGE

“NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS WAS THE FIRST WOMAN TO BE SPRING COMMENCEMENT SPREAKER AT TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE IN 1934. THE LOCAL NEWSPAPER REPRINTED THE ENTIRE SPEECH AND REPORTED THAT THE MESSAGE WAS HEARD FAR BEYOND THE 3,000 GRADUATES, FACULTY AND LOCAL COMMUNITY (BLACK AND WHITE) WHO CROWDED THE INSTITUTE’S GROUNDS THAT DAY. HER MESSAGE REACHED THOUSANDS MORE THROUGH THE AFRICAN AMERICAN PRESS. IT WAS INTRODUCED AS A “BATTLE CRY”, CHARACTERIZED BY SANE AND PRACTICAL OPTIMISM. HERE’S A PORTION OF THE SPEECH:”

“ ...SO THIS AFTERNOON YOU YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WHO ARE SOON GOING AWAY SIT HERE IN DOUBT, AND WONDER WHETHER YOU WILL GET A JOB, WHETHER THERE IS A READY-MADE JOB FOR YOU. I HAVE COME ALL THE WAY DOWN TO TUSKEGEE TO TELL YOU, NO! ALL THE JOBS IN AMERICA ARE TAKEN. THERE ARE NO READY-MADE JOBS ANYWHERE; BUT, THERE ARE ONE HUNDRED AND TWENTY MILLION JOBS THAT CAN BE MADE; AND THAT IS YOUR JOB. IF YOU CAN’T TAKE THAT CHALLENGE, IF YOU CAN’T GO OUT AND BLAZE NEW TRAILS AND FIND NEW AVENUES OF EMPLOYMENT TO MAKE NEW ROADS, FIND NEW HIGHWAYS AND DISCOVER NEW WAYS TO DO OLD THINGS --- IF YOU CAN’T DO THAT, WELL, ‘LOOK TO THE LORD AND BE DISMISSED”

SHE ADDRESSES THE PROBLEMS IN THE COUNTRY AND INVITES THE GRADUATES TO FACE AND SOLVE THESE PROBLEMS IN HER CLOSING REMARKS.

“I WANT YOU TO TAKE THE STRUGGLES, THE HARDSHIPS, AND THE HANDICAPS OF THIS CIVILIZATION AND TURN THEM INTO STEPPING-STONES. THAT IS WHAT OTHER RACES HAVE DONE, BLACK AND WHITE. DISREGARDING THEIR HANDICAPS, THEY DECIDED WITHIN THEIR OWN SOULS THAT THEY WERE MEN AND COULD LOOK THIS OLD WORLD IN THE FACE, COULD BEAT DOWN THE BARRIERS AND CLIMB THE ROUGH SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN...YOU YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN ARE GOING UP THE ROUGH SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN, GOING THROUGH HANDICAPS AND BARRIERS; YOU WILL HAVE TO MEET THE STRUGGLES OF THIS WORLD. BUT OUT OF THE DEPRESSION YOU ARE GOING TO COME FORTH A NEW GROUP OF MEN AND WOMEN, STRONG AND WITH POWERFUL CHARACTERISTICS AND LASTING INFLUENCE”

IN THIS SPEECH, BURROUGHS INVITES THE TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE’S GRADUATES TO CHANGE, FUNDAMENTALLY AND DRAMATICALLY, THEIR VIEW OF THEMSELVES AND THEIR STANDING IN AMERICA. SHE VIGOROUSLY CHALLENGES THE AUDIENCE TOWARDS INNOVATION AND INVENTIVENESS, AS SHE OFFERS A COMPELLING VISION OF A “NEW DAY” AS SHE FORTIFIES THE BATTLE-WEARY, TRANSFORMS THE CURRENT-STRUGGLE, AND PROCLAIMS FUTURE VICTORY. BUT HUMOROUSLY TAUNTS THEM TO GO BEFORE THE GOOD LORD AND BE DISMISSED. THROUGHOUT HER LIFE BURROUGHS USED THE ORATORICAL SKILLS LEARNED AT M STREET HIGH SCHOOL (NOW DUNBAR), ALWAYS TRYING TO MOVE OUR COUNTRY TOWARDS AN IMPROVED AMERICA.”

ONE OF NANNIE'S FAVORITE QUOTES IS: "IF YOU CAN'T FIND A JOB, MAKE ONE."

NANNIE HELEN BURROUGHS' ULTIMATE MESSAGE TO OUR CHILDREN WAS REINFORCED BY NINETY-FIVE YEAR OLD TUSKEGEE AIRMAN, COLONEL CHARLES MCGEE, DURING HIS BLACK HISTORY MONTH PRESENTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA. HE REMINDED OUR YOUNG PEOPLE THAT THE TUSKEGEE AIRMEN'S WORLD WAR II EXPERIENCE, KNOWN BY SOME THROUGH THE MOVIE, "RED TAILS", SENDS THE MESSAGE THAT THEY MUST BE ABLE TO RECOGNIZE OPPORTUNITY, TAKE RESPONSIBILITY AND SEIZE THE CHALLENGE. MOST IMPORTANTLY, HOWEVER, THEY MUST BE PREPARED WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY PRESENTS ITSELF.