

Excerpts from Burroughs' Speech to the Tuskegee Institute Graduates

In her 2008 University of Maryland Doctoral Thesis, Dr. Michelle Mason points out that Nannie Helen Burroughs was the first woman to be the spring commencement speaker at Tuskegee 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 ground that day. Her message reached thousand more through the African American press. It was introduced as a "**Battle Cry**" characterized by sane and practical optimism. Below is 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 GOOD LORD AND BE DISMISSED"

She continues and addresses the future. **"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 WHO COULD LOOK THIS OLD WORLD IN THE FACE, COULD BEAT DOWN THE BARRIERS AND CLIMB THE ROUGH SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN. I HEARD AN OLD WOMAN PRAYING ONE TIME. SHE ASKED, LORD PLEASE DON'T TAKE ME UP THE ROUGH SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN. I SPOKE TO HER AFTERWARDS AND TOLD HER PLEASE NOT TO INCLUDE ME IN THAT NUMBER, BECAUSE THAT WAS NOT THE SIDE I WANTED TO GO UP ON. I WANTED TO GO UP ON THE ROUGH SIDE BECAUSE I KNEW THERE WAS SOME CHANCE I MIGHT GET TO THE TOP. BUT IF I WENT UP THE SMOOTH SIDE I MIGHT SLIDE DOWN. 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"**

Burroughs invited the Tuskegee Institute graduates to change, fundamentally and dramatically, their view of themselves and their standing in America. She vigorously challenged the audience to think about innovation and inventiveness and offered compelling vision of a "**New Day**" as she fortified the battle-weary, transformed the current-struggle, and proclaimed future victory. But, humorously, Burroughs taunted them to "**Go before the Good Lord and be dismissed**" Throughout her life Nannie Helen Burroughs used the oratorical skills learned at M Street School (now Dunbar) in Washington, DC. She always reminded us of our past, while offering solutions for the present, to improve our race and country in the future.

Are her views relevant today?

