

HONORING THE MERCURY 13 WOMEN



www.uwosh.edu/mercury13

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Commencement Speech Honoring the Class of 2007 and the Women of Mercury 13

Given May 12, 2007
by Martha A. Ackmann
(Lights & Fuel)

Chancellor Wells, Provost Earns, distinguished guests, member of the faculty, family, friends and Class of 2007 – thank you for inviting me to share this joyous occasion with you. I have had the great pleasure of visiting your campus several times over the past two years, and I feel I’ve gotten to know you.

And, while some may think that the best way to become acquainted with UW Oshkosh is to watch a Titan women’s softball game or stop by Reeve Memorial Union or maybe even hang out at Kelly’s, I beg to differ.

I think the best way to really learn what a university is all about is to take in an 8 o’clock morning class: *the dreaded 8 a.m. class*. Now we all know that those early time slots are reserved for the uninitiated, those new in town, such as freshmen who don’t yet know what stairwells to take in the A/C.

So when I was on campus last fall, I attended an 8 o’clock morning class, “Fundamentals of Speech Communication,” and I came away impressed. The students were lively. They asked astute questions about my book on these Mercury 13 women and the professor, Jane Wypiszynki, was top notch – the kind who stays after class to ponder a question or who is willing to tease out an idea that – at first – seems improbable. In fact, it was in that class that the idea was hatched for honoring the Mercury 13 women at your wonderful commencement today.

I guess it’s not surprising that good ideas spring to life at UW Oshkosh. This has been a pioneering place from the start. Oshkosh State Normal School, as it was known in 1871, was the first state school in Wisconsin to award degrees to women.

Back then tuition was – hold your breath, parents – free to all who intended to teach in Wisconsin public schools. Books cost \$1 to rent. And in those early days, housing at Oshkosh State was only \$4 a week. Or, as history tells us more precisely: “\$4 a week for a furnished room with lights and fuel.”

When I was on campus and meeting with you in classes, at dinners and receptions, your questions prompted me to step back and ask: What does the story of these gutsy Mercury 13 women really mean to your generation? After all it’s been nearly half

HONORING THE MERCURY 13 WOMEN

of a century, since the women sitting before you demanded equality and the right to pursue their dreams. Your questions and this great commencement have me thinking about take-offs and landings. Your auspicious take-off, of course, and the memorable landing – the honor bestowed on the women here. I've been considering what these two happy occasions have in common. In short: Why are they looking at you and you looking back at them?

The first lesson their story offers, I think, is a lesson in holding on to your dreams. These women certainly saw their dreams challenged. In 1961, after going through secret testing to become astronauts and after acing every test given to John Glenn, Alan Shepard and the rest of the Mercury astronauts – the women were told to stay home. Future testing of women astronauts was abruptly cancelled. Everything was off. They were poised to become the first American women in space, when NASA told them it wasn't worth the time, the money or the trouble to test women.

And that's when their story gets especially interesting. When NASA told the Mercury 13 to pack up and go home, they said "no." Maybe they actually said "no way" or perhaps something even a little stronger. No, they would not just go home quietly. Jerrie Cobb stormed Congress, Capitol Hill and even the White House demanding to know why the door was slammed shut ... why women were being barred from becoming astronauts.

We know that after Cobb and others appealed to Washington, the United States decided that space was no place for a woman. It would take another two decades – and the enormous changes of the women's movement and the Civil Rights movement – before Sally Ride launched into space, becoming the first American woman astronaut.

While the Mercury 13 did not get their shot at space – at least not yet – they refused to let someone else trim their dreams. They fought for what they wanted, what they believed in, and spoke out against discrimination.

No doubt all of you during your years here at UW Oshkosh have caught a glimpse of what you'd really like to do with your life: write a great play, find a way to end child abuse, discover a cure for diabetes. If you can hold on to that vision of yourself and fight to keep it alive, you will be preserving one of the great legacies of the Mercury 13 – the right to be your best self.

One of the most thrilling moments in my life happened in 1999, when astronaut Eileen Collins became the first woman to command the space shuttle. Collins knew the Mercury 13 story and invited the women down to Cape Canaveral to stand in witness to the launch. I went with them, and I'll never forget it. It was a night launch in July. The mosquitoes were terrible. It was hot and sultry. Ice cream cones melted in our hands and dripped down our legs.

But none of that mattered when the shuttle roared off the launch pad. The women looked to the sky at that blaze of orange and yelled and screamed as if it were one of them heading into space. And indeed it was.

You might have thought that the launch would have been a bittersweet moment for the Mercury 13 women. After all, Collins was fulfilling a dream that was cut short for them. But what I remember most from that night was their joy, their unselfish exultation in Collins's great moment. Forty years before, they had kicked open a door that another young woman was walking through now. And they reacted to that triumph with wisdom and great generosity.

HONORING THE MERCURY 13 WOMEN

After her successful mission, I spoke with Commander Collins and asked why she had invited the Mercury 13 to her historic launch. She didn't let a second pass before saying simply, "I stand on their shoulders."

And don't we all? None of us ever achieves a dream all by ourselves. We all stand on shoulders. You're standing on shoulders today. The shoulders of your family who made sure you received a university education, your friends who loved you and made you laugh even when you were your most unlovable, and the professors who stayed with you long after office hours were over to explain what you needed to understand. And for those of you who are the first in your families to graduate with a college degree today, you stand on some especially broad shoulders – shoulders made strong by what has been achieved as well as what has been denied.

When I spent time with you over the last two years, I also enjoyed some afternoons over at the Experimental Aircraft Association, another fine example of

the good ideas that come out of Oshkosh. And I was reminded of a final lesson these women have taught me. So many of them – Irene Leverton, Sarah Ratley, the family of the late Jean Hixson – spoke to me about the freedom pilots feel when they're flying an airplane – when they're quite literally "above-it-all." They tell me that high above the ground, all by themselves, the temporal worries of the world do indeed melt away. You look out and see the horizon – a thin blue line against the sky, a line that points to infinity.

As you graduate today and claim the degree that you've worked so hard to obtain, I hope you see what pilots see: the long view, the view of the sky that does not stop and a world where indeed the sky is not the limit. That this commencement serves as your own launch and that you soar into possibility. The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh has given you what it promised those first students back in 1871: a "furnished room with lights and fuel." Now it's your moment to take that most precious power source – imagination and energy – and ignite the world.

