

THE BEAUTY OF DREAMS
2004 NCSSM COMMENCEMENT SPEECH
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Good morning! It is great to be back! It is indeed an honor for me to be your graduation speaker this morning.

Before I begin, let me congratulate the parents and families of the class of 2004. Breathe a big sigh of relief: your kids did it—they are high-school graduates! For the parents, the hard part is really yet to come—those tuition and incidental payments for college. To the class of 2004, may I, along with your parents and families and friends and the NCSSM community, offer you my warmest congratulations! You deserve a big round of applause.

In the twenty or so minutes that I have, I want to get across three important points: (1) entrepreneurship and risk taking, (2) lifelong learning, and (3) global citizenship. I am a storyteller. I hope that my stories today will inspire all of you to dream big!

I am the founder and president of the Global Fund for Children, an organization dedicated to advancing the education and dignity of children and youth around the world. I decided to found the Global Fund for Children ten years ago based on some of my own poignant experiences. I am the daughter of Indian immigrants and was brought up in eastern North Carolina, in Greenville. I spent all of my childhood in Greenville, growing up as a “faculty brat.” But I also spent my summers in India with my extended family. These two very diverse experiences had a very profound effect on me. In addition, my experiences at NCSSM, especially my community service at the Durham Museum of Science and my mentorship program doing recombinant DNA research at Duke University, had a very positive impact on my professional journey today.

My vision was to become a doctor. But after college, I kept taking different paths to learn something new. After I received my undergraduate degree in biology from Bryn Mawr College, I received a Rotary Graduate Fellowship. On my fellowship, I went to South Asia, where Rotarians there told me, “Go work with grassroots organizations. Go see what’s really happening in the field.” Which is what I did, and I saw extraordinary leaders and innovators working with children and women and creating innovative change. After my year abroad, I went to work for a think tank in Washington DC and then decided to get a degree in public policy at Duke University.

It wasn’t until I was about to finish my public policy degree that my mentor, Bill Ascher, asked, “Do you really want to go to medical school?” I answered, “No, I want to start the Global Fund for Children.” I told him my vision, and he supported me by giving me a desk, a chair, and a telephone at the Center for International Development at Duke. But I had to go out and raise some money. I went to a venture capital group in New York City that not only invested in high-tech companies but also invested in social entrepreneurs through their charitable giving. Three venture capitalists interviewed me. They were really tough. They asked really hard questions, and I thought they were really mean. It

sure beat Dr. Miller's NCSSM interview of me over twenty years ago. But perhaps it was my hallucinogenic optimism that convinced them.

Because in 1994, when I was 26, they armed me with \$100,000 in seed capital to found the Global Fund for Children—here in Durham, North Carolina. There are two very important elements to the Global Fund for Children. The first is our children's-book-publishing venture dedicated to teaching children to value diversity. I wanted to write children's books that would bridge the global gap—teaching our young people in this country that they are part of a global community and that they have a stake in the future. Interestingly, our first book, *Children from Australia to Zimbabwe*, was rejected by every major publisher. So I convinced funders in North Carolina to provide grants for me to self-publish the book in return for donating three copies to every public school in North Carolina. In 1996, *Children from Australia to Zimbabwe* was self-published and it was a great success! The same publishers that had said no came back and said, "We want to publish your other books." Today we have over fifteen children's books in the marketplace.

The second element of the Global Fund for Children is the provision of small grants to innovative educational community-based organizations around the world. Many of the world's children are denied access to basic learning opportunities—almost 125 million get no education at all, and about another 300 million go in and out of school. Yet it is not only the children, their families, and their communities that suffer the consequences. The world as a whole loses these children's energy and their enormous potential for leadership, labor, and problem solving—potential that, if realized, could transform all of our lives.

I have met hundreds of individuals who, against great odds, are working to educate and improve the lives of children and youth in their communities. These educators, leaders, and innovators are truly changing the world, each in their own unique way. They've chosen paths that take them away from the norm. They recognize that sometimes the accepted way of doing things just doesn't work, and they've taught me that in order to make things happen one must always be open to new methods, new inspirations, and new ideas and that one has to take risks.

The most creative and effective projects to benefit children and youth are often generated at the community level, where financial resources are very scarce. I also believe that local groups can best understand the needs of their community and its children. My vision for starting the Global Fund for Children was to work very, very hard to discover successful community-based organizations that promoted youth leadership and improved education for children who otherwise would be left behind.

As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." Let me tell you some great stories of innovative organizations started by visionaries.

The first grantee that we supported was in Bhubaneswar, in the state of Orissa in India. I don't know if you've been to India, but I want you to close your eyes and imagine a train station in any of the cities in India. It's bustling. It's busy. And most likely you're going to see children who are working at the train platform. They're the kids who are carrying the luggage, who are selling trinkets, who are sweeping the trains or sweeping the platforms. They live and they work on these platforms. Almost twelve years ago, a woman named Inderjit Khurana, a teacher, went by these train platforms every day, and she was trying to figure out, "How do I get these kids to go to school?" A lightbulb went on in her head, and she said, "You know, I think I'm going to bring school to these kids." So one day she brought a basket of magic, with crayons and slates and chalk, and she went to the train platform. One kid came and became very curious, then two, then four, then eight, and then sixteen, and she had a school. That school with two teachers costs only about \$700 a year to support. She created about 15 schools in and around Bhubaneswar, but what is even more amazing is that she has worked with other non-governmental groups across India to replicate this model.

As you all know, the AIDS crisis is devastating many African countries, including Zambia. It is estimated that over 570,000 Zambian children have lost one or both parents to AIDS. This is roughly 10 percent of all Zambian children. Children's Town, in rural Zambia, was started by Moses Zulu. Children's Town is a small-scale town and boarding school run by 300 young people who are AIDS orphans and street children. They not only go to school but are health educators as well, going out into the villages to teach families about HIV prevention and also teaching other young people at the school. Their total budget is \$150,000, or \$500 per child.

The power of the Internet is how we found Children's Town. Several years ago we wanted to fund something in Zambia, so we went to an association called Children in Need. And we said, "Can you tell us about two or three excellent grassroots NGOs?" and they told us about Children's Town. So we e-mailed Mr. Zulu, but we didn't hear from him right away, and we got worried. I kept saying, "We'll keep e-mailing him," and a month later, he e-mails us back and says, "Please forgive me for not getting back to you, but the reason I didn't is because I have to walk for two hours and then catch a bus for four hours to check my e-mail once a month." That's amazing to me because ten years ago we would have had to rely on the postal system, and I'm not sure if we would have ever found Children's Town. But within six months we made a grant to this organization, and they've been a grantee partner of ours for many years now.

The Global Fund for Children was one of the first funders of the secret home schools for girls in Afghanistan that were started by the Afghan Institute for Learning while the country was under the Taliban regime. This brutal regime denied girls and women access to education. But two days after September 11, I called the founder of the Afghan Institute for Learning, Sakena Yacoobi, and asked, "How can we continue to help you?" She said, "I need to do something for our boys. I want to create schools just for boys, and I want to create a new curriculum, a social studies curriculum that includes a peace training and education module that promotes the importance of others, the importance of nonviolent conflict resolution, and the inherent tolerance of Islam." Basically our grant

over the past two and a half years has created about five schools educating over one thousand Afghani boys.

Last but not least, I have to mention two extraordinary individuals who are associated with NCSSM. They have dedicated their lives to education. They are entrepreneurs and risk takers; they are lifelong learners; and they are global citizens. They are Kevin Bartkovich, my former calculus teacher at NCSSM, and the former governor of North Carolina, Jim Hunt. Kevin Bartkovich, who for most of his professional life worked in gifted education, decided to start a secondary school in one of the poorest places on earth—Bundibugyo, Uganda. He and his family live there full-time, inspiring and educating Ugandan children. It is a privilege for the Global Fund for Children to help support Kevin’s vision. Former governor Jim Hunt is the founder of NCSSM and Smart Start and a lot of other things. Many of you may not know this, but when Governor Hunt was a young man, he and his wife went to Nepal on a Ford Foundation fellowship to help farmers learn new ways to grow their crops and produce more food. He and his wife, Carolyn, were there for two years. Rumor has it that he can still speak a bit of Nepali. Kevin Bartkovich and Jim Hunt are my role models.

In short, I think all the organizations that I mentioned here today, and thousands of others, have been an inspiration, and for many, their work has arisen from some of the most discouraging circumstances. Yet they have found viable ways to ensure that young people are receiving the attention they deserve. These organizations are truly, I think, the foundation of international humanitarian work, and without their innovations, the risks that they take, and the discoveries that they make, we would never have achieved a lot of the successes that we have now. So, I am pleased that the Global Fund for Children has awarded almost two million dollars to support over 125 innovative groups globally.

So I leave you today as you embark on your next life journey—college. Take risks in your academic and professional training (if you are a biology major, make sure you take an art history course—I regret that I never did), be open to learning about everything, and make sure you take a semester or year abroad to learn about another country and its culture. Now more than ever, it is important for all of us to be global citizens. The stakes have never been higher.

I feel comforted, because I see all of you as the future leaders who will take on some very challenging problems and find creative solutions. Whatever path you decide to take, don’t forget to have lots of fun. And remember, “the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams.” Once again, I offer you my warmest congratulations. Thanks so much for listening to me this morning.