**“Fighting the Wrong Enemy”**

Remarks of Elisa Villanueva Beard

Alumni Gathering – Detroit, MI

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Good morning. This is our first national Summit to bring alumni educators together for celebration and professional development at Teach For America, and I honestly could not be more excited about being here today. This is my booster shot of inspiration and energy that will carry me through the rest of the summer.

It is energizing to be here with all of you. I feel such a shared struggle and a deep, deep belief that comes from our shared experiences in classrooms across the country. The feisty nature of this group as well as the love and compassion we all have for our communities is so powerful.

What a morning it has been as we have listened to students and regrounded ourselves in the power and purpose of our collective work.

I’m Elisa Villanueva Beard, co-CEO of Teach For America. I’m also a new convert to Twitter (@villanuevabeard), so please follow me to keep my numbers ahead of my fellow co-CEO Matt Kramer! Just kidding. You should follow him too (@Kramer\_matt). Please also feel free to tweet out your thoughts and reactions to everything you’re experiencing throughout the day, including this speech. I won’t be offended if you’re looking at your phones.

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I’m a little emotional right now. With all that has gone on this week in our nation, in the wake of this weekend’s verdict, it’s quite a moment to know that we are in a space that’s sacred. Dr. King road-tested his “Dream” speech right here at the Cobo Center a few months before delivering it on the mall in Washington –he created a vision for what we want for our children and our country. And through Trayvon Martin’s story we realize how far we are from realizing that vision.

Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Birmingham, Alabama on Good Friday in 1963. This April, many in our country paused to reflect on the 50th anniversary of his Letter from Birmingham Jail. The open letter King wrote in response to local clergymen who disapproved of his methods has had a profound impact on me and my own leadership because it has challenged my own consciousness.

His words remind me that it is easy for me, for each one of us in this room to be complacent. It’s really hard to act in any way that goes against the grain. It takes courage to fight this injustice we are all so committed to.

As historian Diane McWhorter points out, the civil rights battles in King’s era weren’t simply a conflict between good and evil but actually a conflict between good and normal. In that time, racism that seems so outrageous today was in fact an understandable "way of life" practiced by average, ordinary "good" people. Dr. King focused his efforts on the moderate majority that chose to remain silent.

Colleagues, we – all of us – are threats to the moderate “good” people of today. The problem we have committed to address is one that can be easily ignored by people who have the luxury, the choice to avoid facing the truths of inequity. People who accept the status quo as normal, as okay. But we, all of us here in this room, we don’t believe there is a choice. We can’t accept the normality of the system serving our kids today.

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My fire, passion, and commitment for improving education - was ignited nineteen years ago when I began my journey at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. I arrived on campus alone with 3 pieces of luggage and no idea what was ahead of me.

For a girl who grew up in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas in a town called McAllen about 20 miles north of the Mexican border, DePauw was a complete culture shock.

It was my first time in a community of people who didn’t understand my culture or background. I had to endure jokes about Mexicans. I once even heard a friend’s mom refer to the people down the street as “dirty Mexicans.” It made me ask questions like: Is this how I am viewed by my peers? Am I not worthy of an education that DePauw provides because I’m Mexican? Do my peers believe that I’m as smart and capable as they are?

On top of it all, the most challenging piece for me was how underprepared I actually was. I graduated from high school in the top 10% of my class. But as a freshman at DePauw, I realized I was living the educational inequity that exists in our country.

I’ll never forget Intro to Philosophy. Some of my classmates would spend 45 minutes studying for a test and get A’s, while I would spend hours at the library studying every night, and still wound up with a C+ in that class. I started to lose confidence. Self-doubt began to haunt me.

But with the support and deep belief of my parents and my mentor, Joe Disque, I overcame it. In fact, I conquered it. I came out the other side with a newfound sense of social responsibility.

And that led me to Teach For America. In 1998 I joined the corps in Phoenix where I taught for 3 years. Getting to know my kids and their families inspired me to make this my life’s work.

Later – I saw alumni friends create a new normal in founding and leading schools where I grew up. These schools expected that 100% of their mostly first generation college students would go to and expected to get through college within 6 years. This inspired me, and I have never turned back.

It’s an honor to help lead an organization that allowed me to fall in love with kids I taught, find my life’s work, join a network of unrelenting and dedicated people and even find a wonderful husband, Jeremy Beard. And the greatest blessing Jeremy and I have today is that we are raising our 3 sons, Langston, Malcolm, and Marshall.

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We get to have a family meeting today with nearly 1,000 alums in this room to talk about where Teach For America is after 24 years. Wendy Kopp is a fierce, courageous, and thoughtful leader. I am so grateful to call her a friend. I am even more grateful to be her colleague as she built her big idea and pursued it with a steadfast belief and determination over the years.

When Matt and I came on board as co-CEOs several months ago, we agreed that for Teach For America to continue in the collective fight to shape a new normal for our kids across the nation, we must honor our past by being courageous about our future. I want to share that with you today.

We’ve spent the past few months listening to a number of alumni around the country – both in private and public settings - and we want to be open and honest about some challenges we’re facing and questions that have been raised through these conversations. Today, I want to share what we’ve heard and tell you what we are doing about it.

But before I get to this, I want to be clear about one thing, we have critics today who have become increasingly strident in their views. Lately it seems that TFA somehow represents everything they hate about school reform, from charter schools, to testing, to nonprofit organizations who are challenging the status quo.

It’s disheartening that people who should be our partners in a larger movement for social justice are fighting the wrong enemy.

When they make us the enemy – they’re talking about people like you and me – people who have put their heart and soul into the work of helping our nation’s most disadvantaged kids fulfill their true potential. We put in long hours and have invested meaningfully in the lives of our students over the years.

They’re talking about a growing community of educators and policy leaders, community organizers, advocates, and social entrepreneurs – who not only believe that the problems of public education are massive – but they are also solvable and refuse to accept today’s system as anything that is normal for our kids.

They’re even talking about people like my sister Elaine – who is a traditionally certified special education teacher and has been working in the San Antonio traditional public school system for 17 years; Or my sister Monica -- an alternatively certified middle school teacher who has taught for 9 years in traditional public schools.

Neither of them are connected to Teach For America in any way beyond their relationship with me, and though they took different paths to the classroom, they both fully believe in our mission and are part of the movement to end educational inequity.

They’re talking about 6000 incoming corps members who are in training right now and will start working this fall in places like the Rio Grande Valley where I grew up – or the Mississippi Delta, or the Navajo reservation in New Mexico or right here in Detroit. People like me and you who will teach in places many would dismiss as lost or forgotten, or worse yet, invisible.

We are not the enemy. We want all kids to meet their full potential.

We ARE part of the solution.

We are what happens when people meet their students, fall in love with them and their families, and make the decision to dedicate their lives to fighting for their kids and families any way they know how.

We have committed with incredible respect, humility, thoughtfulness, and courage NOT to be part of the silent majority in our country.

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Today, our Teach For America community comprises nearly 11,000 corps members and 32,000 alumni. We are a community where 83% of all alumni work in education or with low-income communities. And every year, our corps and our alumni get more diverse, with backgrounds more like those of the communities we work with. This year, 55% of our incoming corps are either people of color or are themselves from low-income communities.

All across America Teach For America alums are doing great things every day – both in and out of classroom. You are tirelessly committing to giving all children the education they need and deserve so they can become empowered and free citizens in our communities.

No one can take that away from us.

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On our recent listening tour, Matt and I met with over 1,300 people across the country. We heard from:

* Hard-working dedicated classroom teachers talking about their extraordinary acts of leadership in ensuring every child they taught would meet their potential as young men and women.
* Grateful parents who felt that our corps members had made a meaningful and lasting impact in the lives of their children.
* And alumni who have stayed in the classroom, stayed in the field or moved into other professions but have a deep sense of responsibility to equity for all kids.

We also got some tough questions on the tour – raising the kinds of issues we increasingly read about in blogs and elsewhere.

Are we diverse enough?

Is a two year commitment to teaching good enough?

Are we really engaged with our communities?

Are we moving the needle enough after 24 years?

How can we continue to grow and become even more effective?

These are all fair questions – and we’re committed in the year ahead to taking them head on and either making real changes, or speaking with firmness and clarity on why we think we’re doing the right thing. There will probably be a little of both.

At the same time, Matt and I have heard what you’ve said and we believe that every single one of us here and across the nation can play a role in making Teach For America stronger. We have made 5 commitments coming out of our tour.

First - We have heard that TFA is sometimes experienced by those within our community as not always being good listeners, not being open to challenge and criticism, and not open to hearing the diversity of thought in our community. We are going to chance this. We want to hear your toughest questions. We will utilize these questions and challenges to make us stronger. We do not see a future where we can maximize our potential without changing this.

Second, several people have said we are all about data and results. They feel undervalued and like they cannot bring their full selves to this work. And while I will unapologetically say that data and outcomes matter and the discipline of using it is critically important, we need to remind ourselves that education is about human interactions –built on the fabric and strength of interwoven trusting relationships. You don’t build a social justice movement on data. You build a movement on heart and character. We need to build those kinds of relationships with each other, our students, communities, and colleagues in this work.

Third, we know that in some places we’re not fully connected to the communities we work with. We have to take responsibility for engaging as community members and organizers as do our corps members and alumni. We need to do a better job of learning the culture and assets and the character of the people we partner with. It is critical we understand the unique challenges each community faces.

Fourth, we need to reground ourselves in the purpose of growth - in the fact that growing our scale in a region is one lever among many. Maximizing impact is not only about growing in size, but rather about working in deep partnership with our communities and about maximizing the impact of each and every corps member and alum. We want to ensure that our decisions about scale are responsive to the needs and context of the communities in which we operate. We will make these decisions with deep concern for our short and long term impact in the communities we work with. Let me be clear, we’re not about growth for its own sake. We are about meeting a need.

Finally, we need to invest more in helping our corps members be even more effective. Too often corps members say they do not get the support they need to ensure they can deliver on the well rounded world class education our students deserve and they want to provide. We need to do better.

But for all that we heard about ourselves and our challenges, we are resolved today more than ever about one thing: We are continuously looking to improve, learn and evolve as an organization and stay with the fight because we are not fine with the status quo in public education.

Every year, 1.3 million students drop out of high school in the United States. More than half are students of color, and most are from low-income communities.

Just 9% of kids growing up in low-income communities graduate from college by age 25.

Over 80% of Black and Latino 4th graders are below proficient in reading and math in our schools.

Every educator –every person and every institution involved in the field – from schools of education to states and districts and charters to Teach For America – should be asking themselves hard questions about their impact. Because no one can be satisfied with the status quo.

Still, in the face of these painful truths, I am filled with optimism because of the progress we have seen since Dr. King wrote his letter, fueled by so many who have made sacrifices for equity and justice.

I’m filled with optimism because the evidence of what’s possible is everywhere—including my hometown in South Texas.

I’m also filled with optimism because so many of you have chosen to come here this week. Look around the room. Look at the person beside you, in front of you, behind you. Remember that we are not alone. In every corner of this country there are people who are working to give children the opportunities they deserve.

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I began by talking about Martin Luther King and I want to end with him because his example inspires me every day.

We must remain a constant challenge to the consciousness of the moderate “good” people Dr. King wrote about 50 years ago.

We must unite in opposition to a system of education that loses half of its young men from low-income, minority communities. No one can accept that.

We must unite in opposition to a political culture where it’s acceptable to cut education programs but it’s toxic to raise taxes for underfunded schools.

We must unite in opposition to the complacency and indifference of too many people who think public education is doing just fine because their own child’s school is fine.

If anyone is looking for an enemy – that’s the enemy. It’s not Teach For America or the charter movement, or Bill Gates or standardized testing. The enemy is the status quo – and for those who defend it –the burden of proof is on them to explain to the parents of America’s poorest children why it’s better to do nothing than something.

For me – doing nothing is not an option.

And so today – I not only call on you – our alumni, friends and corps members – but I call on the larger education community to do more to support each other. There is too much at stake for us to do anything else.

In his letter from Birmingham jail, Dr. King wrote about a “tragic misconception of time,” saying:

It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively.

To me, those words speak to the urgency of now. Time alone will not solve this problem. It’s going to take sacrifice from every person in this room, from the thousands of others in this movement, and from the communities across the country that are desperate for change. Time is neutral, but we shouldn’t be. Let’s use **our** time, constructively, to help build a country where all children have an equal chance in life.

Thank you.