

I'd like to share a few things you won't find in my bio. In addition to being an engineer and entrepreneur, I am happily married to my business partner, a mother of four, an only child, and a T.K. No, not a P.K. or preacher's kid; I'm a teacher's kid. As the child of a retired educator, the bar for educational achievement was set really high. My parents were the first in both of their families to matriculate past high school. They believed the only way for me to succeed and break through many of the barriers they still faced was to obtain a college degree. While I understood education served as the primary escape from poverty and oppression for my parent's generation, my pursuit of education has primarily been about what I can do for others.

When you are in elementary and middle school, you go to class because your parents tell you to go, right? Even if you liked school, your primary purpose was to gain basic knowledge for the next phase of your life. However, as I moved into high school, I began to think about pursuing a career through which I could support a family and help others at the same time.

My counselor at University City High School signed me up for a program called Inroads. Inroads showed me that with a degree in civil engineering, I could help people every single day by providing clean air, clean water, and safe routes to work and school. I realized my dream by obtaining my B.S. in Civil from Georgia Tech in Atlanta. After graduation, I returned home to work for the Illinois Department of Transportation and later founded ABNA with my best friend and the love of my life Abe Adewale. Together in our 28 years of business, we have been fortunate to hire hundreds of people mentor thousands of students, and contribute to many charitable causes.

A few years ago, I wondered how I could do even more for my community and ended up at The Harris Stowe State University, where my mother earned her teaching degree. At Harris Stowe, I dove into my urban affairs and public administration courses, which helped me better understand the laws and policies that have been exerted throughout history to marginalize the poor and disabled, the LGBTQ community, women, and people of color.

I am grateful for my time at Harris Stowe because it brought me here to you. Not just to this stage, but as a student. Like you, I look forward to sitting in the audience one day soon, listening to a speaker drone about their life as I have as a future Doctor of Education in Social Justice! Many people ask me why I chose this path rather than go back to school to pursue a higher degree in engineering or business. The simple reason is that such pursuits would be more self-serving than community-directed.

Enough about me, let's focus for a few minutes on you, our 2022 UMSL College of Arts and Sciences graduates in Math, Arts, Science, and Humanities. The acronym M.A.S.H. came to mind. I then thought more about the word MASH and all its implications. As a verb to mash means to "reduce a substance to a uniform mass by crushing it." For some, that definition conjures up images of destruction and wholesale change. It can also refer to creating something new with diverse components. This makes me think of great mashups in pop culture like rap group RUN DMC and rock band Aerosmith's classic "Walk this Way" or Dolly Parton and Doja Cat's upcoming Tik Tok "Mexican Pizza: The Musical."

For you, I want to offer another definition of MASH; **Making** a Difference while **Asking** Questions, **Seeking** new Connections, and **Helping** Others.

## **Making a Difference**

This past Tuesday, May 10, I attended an event honoring ten phenomenal, diverse women making a difference in our community in education, health advocacy, giving, multicultural leadership, the arts, social responsibility, and more. Some are fully engaged in community work, and some are still gainfully employed. What they all had in common was that they were willing to use their talent and treasure in the service of others.

### **Ask questions -**

Don't just take WHAT people tell you about the state of society, ask WHY things are the way they are and research HOW they got there.

Don't accept that people are included or excluded simply on merit. Favor and relationships often play a part in who gets to participate in or benefit from various aspects of society. This is neither bad nor good, as long as there is a path for anyone to have a seat at the table. The best way to set an inclusive and welcoming table is to:

### **Seek people who are not like you.**

There is a well-known saying that "If you always do what you've always done," and similarly, "If you continue to think like you've always thought, you'll continue to get what you've always got."

If we apply this to how we interact with people, "If you only seek out those who are like you, you will never be anything more than who or what you are." Let's think about that for a moment. If you are a math wiz and only hang out with mathletes, you may never understand the connection between Math and Humanities. If you are an art prodigy and only consort with other artists, you may never discern the link between creativity and the technical skills that fuel the sciences

As you move out into the world, I challenge each of you to seek out people who speak different languages, celebrate different faiths, belong to a different political party, work in a different industry, and for those of us from St. Louis, people who attended a rival high school.

Finally, I implore each of you to introduce a new connection to your circle of influence to:

### **Help others**

I could tell you all kinds of stories about how lending a helping hand can elevate you and others at the same time. Like how sharing my time and a few dollars to the science center led me to a robotics competition, from which I was invited to a committee meeting that launched a 20-year opportunity to inspire students in STEM, for which the chair of that committee asked me to represent her at a conference, where I presented a welcome to an international competition in St. Louis with a poem literally written on the back of a napkin, after which I was asked to serve as an international emcee. While serving in that role, I helped an air force lieutenant find his way to a crucial meeting. One year later, that same lieutenant, remembering my small favor, introduced me to a three-star general who, at his retirement as a four-star general, introduced me to the Secretary of Defense.

If you apply this formula to life, using Math, Art, Science, and Humanities to Making a Difference by Asking probing questions while Seeking out those who are a little different and Helping to elevate all voices, together; we can MASH the divisions in our communities and create something new and beautiful for generations to come!