Commencement Speech: Address to Homestead Campus Graduates
Miami Dade College, Miami, FL May 5, 2018

Roots to Rise
Dr. Karen A. Stout

Mariah, thank you for that kind introduction. It is truly touching to be introduced by you. We have a lot in common---our connections to Phi Theta Kappa, our supportive families, our passion for learning, and, our love of the ocean! Thank you, Dr. Padron, for inviting me and for your leadership, not just of Miami Dade College, but also for your unwavering advocacy for and leadership of public higher education in this country. You are a friend, a mentor and a valued member of our Achieving the Dream Board of Directors. In many ways, I stand here on your shoulders.

President Jacobs, Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, families, friends, and---most importantly---Homestead Campus graduates, I am honored to be with you this morning to share in the celebration of your individual and collective successes.

This tradition of commencement offers us a unique opportunity to take a purposeful pause. A purposeful pause, if we create it, is the space “in between” ---it is the space “in between” your journey to today and the next thing after today. That “in between” space is a time to simply pay attention to what is happening now, to delight in being present, to acknowledge and be content with what you have accomplished before you begin to engage the question: “What’s Next?”

I remember my first commencement. I was in the fourth grade. I remember the pageantry, the pride, and the energy. I can still see my dad in his academic regalia. It was his graduation. That day, I watched my father earn his bachelor’s degree after eight years of night school. He was a young father of three children. At the age of 26, he enrolled in college, in search of the American Dream, staying enrolled because his GI bill benefits paid for his tuition and books, and, maybe more importantly at that time, what dollars were left over put food on our family’s table. I now realize that my belief in the transformational power of education was formed that day in the Lyric Theatre in Baltimore, Maryland. I feel fortunate to have opportunities like today to reinforce that belief and to relive, in some ways, that moment from my childhood.
Like many of you who entered Miami Dade a few years ago, I started today’s remarks with a blank page in front of me. Daunting. Uncomfortable. Challenging. Yet, filled with opportunity and surprise. The blank page, as you well know, can be unsettling AND also thrilling if we can just get started, and suspend worrying about the challenges ahead of us.

So, like many of you when you decided to start, or continue, and now finish your education, I suspended worrying and built these remarks around a theme that I think—I hope—will resonate with you.

That theme is root to rise. Root to rise is a familiar instruction in a yoga classroom. Root to rise! In yoga, this refers to establishing a strong base from which most any other pose can rise. You have built strong roots here at Miami Dade College that will enable you to rise.

Your college is also rooted in this community. 93 percent of all students at Miami Dade College are from Miami Dade County. That says a lot about the college and the community. It shows, clearly, that you are connected; that you are sharing the same roots.

We are uniquely intertwined, community colleges and communities. Our roots, as a sector, give rise to America’s next generation of entrepreneurs, educators, lawyers, technicians, nurses, aviation professionals, first responders, scientists, architects, doctors, researchers, authors, business owners, community leaders, legislators, and teachers. Our roots into our communities are sprawling and deep. Nearly half of all bachelor’s degree holders in this country have attended one of America’s community colleges. Sometimes misunderstood and undervalued by those outside our communities, we are well known by those inside our communities because our solid roots--- from the programs we offer to prepare you for future occupations and service to our roles in being vital civic and cultural destinations---give rise to strong and vibrant economies and communities across this nation. Most importantly, we offer our graduates a root to rise. Look at Miami Dade’s economic mobility rates. Thirty-six percent of Miami Dade graduates move up two or more income quintiles because of their experience here.

Clearly, as graduates, you are now prepared to use your own roots to rise to lead forward and shape the future.

The first step in root to rise is laying a well-designed foundation. You have, through your many hours of hard work as a successful student combined with your ability to juggle work and family obligations been laying a well-designed foundation. Your professors and your advisors and the staff and your fellow students and each and every person who you have met along the way here at Miami Dade has contributed to laying this well-designed foundation with you. That's what great colleges like Miami Dade do. They put you, students, at the center of the design of everything and they commit, each day, in every part of the organization, to providing you with the programs, learning environments, academic supports, non-academic supports, and exceptional teaching necessary for your success.
Great colleges like Miami Dade College are committed to equitable access and equitable outcomes for all students. They set high expectations and craft caring environments, creating places where you feel a sense of belonging. Sense of belonging, we know from research, is that supportive magic that is so important to all students, especially first generation students, for success. The foundations you have designed and that the college has designed are not built by accident. They are built with intention. They root to rise.

Let’s go back to the origin of the phrase root to rise. Think of the trees around us. They stand tall. They sway in the breeze. They provide shade. Most withstand whatever nature brings their way: strong winds, heavy rains, even hurricanes.

Why? How?

Because, the palm trees that are so iconic in South Florida have a special design, a design that we can learn from.

First, palm trees have rambling roots. Most palm trees have a large number of short roots with wide networks that create a bottom-heavy base that helps keep the tree in place. Think about the rambling roots you have established here. You have faculty mentors who will follow you for life. You have a network of new friends. You have growing contacts in your community. You have a well-established bench of people I call “vision supporters”---people who will never say you can’t be something you dream to be, yet are also able to be constructive in their feedback when it is necessary. Your have established your own personal board of directors here at Miami Dade. And, you will need this board in the future.

Second, palm trees have a wiry trunk. The stem of a palm tree is made of many small bundles of woody material making it very strong. Your many experiences here--inside each course and each classroom, inside each program, inside your co-curricular programs, inside any supports you took advantage of like career advising, tutoring or supplemental instruction---all are bundles of materials---learning---from which you can build.

Third, palm trees have clever leaves. In nice weather, the fronds spread out and make a canopy, but in instances of strong wind and water, the fronds, fold up. They are designed, like you, to be resilient. In your resiliency, developed here, you have learned to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, a life skill essential for success, a skill you will continue to build upon.

You are secure in your foundation. I stand here confident that from these strong roots, built here at Miami Dade College, you will rise!

Why?

Because your strong roots will give rise to your voice, a voice you discovered, clarified and honed here. A voice that is important to elevate, now more than ever, in your career, in your parenting, in your service. We see every day, all around us, the power
of voice. Call on your rambling roots, your network, your board of directors, to use your roots to give rise to your voice!

Why?

Because your strong roots will give rise to trusting your own potential. This is not an easy thing to do. There will be times when this trust will be tested, by your own self-doubt and by the doubts of others. Resist it. Call on your clever leaves, your resiliency, your talent for being comfortable with being uncomfortable to use your roots to give rise to your potential!

Why?

Because your strong roots will give rise to you finding your true inspiration leading you to craft a life of joy and purpose around the threads of your passions. We often think it is impossible to combine purpose and joy, but you can if you remember what brought you the most delight in your time here and thread these experiences together. Be brave. Call on your wiry trunk and all your bundles learning to use your roots to give rise to your inspiration!

Today is a day I hope you will never forget. I know that today is a day that I will never forget. You all inspire me. My being here, today, activates my own roots to rise.

I'd like to leave you today with a passage from a poem written by Ilan Shamir. It’s titled Advice of a Tree.

Dear Friend,
Stand Tall and Proud
Sink your roots deeply into the Earth
Reflect the light of a greater source
Think long term
Go out on a limb
Seek nourishment from the good things in life
Simple pleasures
Earth, fresh air, light
Be content with your natural beauty
Drink plenty of water
Let your limbs sway and dance in the breezes
Be flexible
Remember your roots
Enjoy the view!

Root to Rise! Thank you!