

Remarks by the First Lady at Spelman College Commencement

Atlanta, Georgia, May 15, 2011

Thank you. Let me tell you it is a pleasure and an honor to be with all of you today. Let me first of all congratulate this year's Spelman graduates. In the past four years, you didn't just write a chapter in your own life story. You also became part of the Spelman college story – a story that began 130 years ago.

Everyone knows the details of this story: how two white women from up North – Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles – came here to Atlanta to establish a Female Seminary. They started out in a dark church basement and their first class had just 11 students, many of whom were former slaves. Their teachers started with nothing but a couple of Bibles, some notebooks and some pencils. When it rained, it got so damp in that church basement that grass started growing on the floor. The light was so poor that students could barely see their teachers.

But still, week after week, more women showed up to enroll. One of my heroines is Marian Wright Edelman, who after graduating from this college in 1960, started working as a young civil rights lawyer. White colleagues and judges refused to shake her hand. Despite being ridiculed by her white colleagues in court and despite the threats to her life, she continued to represent her clients. She continued to oppose unjust laws.

And for generations, that is what Spelman women have done. They have seen every defeat as a challenge. Now, did they have moments of doubt, anxiety and fear? Did they have moments of despair when they thought about giving up? Of course they did. We all do.

But in those moments I want you to think about all those women who came before you, women like those first 11 students. Think about how they didn't sit around complaining about their lack of resources and opportunities. They were Spelman women with the privilege of a Spelman education. And instead of focusing on what they didn't have, they focused on what they did have: their intellect, their courage, their determination, their passion.

Graduates, every single one of you has an obligation to do the same. You have an obligation to see each temporary defeat as an opportunity to learn and grow. You have an obligation to face whatever life throws your way with confidence and hope.

I can assure you of one thing: with a Spelman education, you all have everything you need to be everything you've ever wanted to be.

So my best wishes for your future careers!