

“Thank you sincerely Gianna, for your kind words. I am honored to speak to you this evening. The theme of tomorrow’s conference, 'Best Practices in Supporting the Whole Student,' resonates deeply with me. It encapsulates the essence of my educational journey.

I stand here today, profoundly grateful for the blessings that have shaped my life. One such blessing was the Charlotte W. Newcombe Scholarship, which opened doors that seemed beyond reach. It's through this scholarship that I stand before you, a testament to the impact an investment in education can have.

My path, however, was far from easy. Born to teenage parents in the inner city projects of Jersey City, I was no stranger to adversity. The echoes of gunshots and the shadows of violence were my daily companions. My mom told me that education was the key to a better life, and I owed it to my ancestors to get a college education. I promised her I would.

She toiled tirelessly to provide me with a quality primary education, even if it meant our daily sustenance was humble. I remember eating peanut butter and bologna sandwiches and having pinto bean soup every day. When I would complain she would say (in her Highpoint, North Carolina / Jersey accent) *“You can eat good food later. Right now my money is for your education, and your job will be to give back because*

*to whom much is given much is required.*” Her toughness was matched only by her fairness.

She was my world.

Then, just ten days after my 14th birthday, my world died. The following month, my father died.

The challenges I faced grew steeper. I found myself getting into trouble, fights, and court appearances. I was a young soul yearning for stability and I was extremely angry at the world. By my senior year, at the tender age of 16, I was homeless.

Yet, within the crucible of hardship, I discovered a truth about humanity. Goodness transcends race and creed. While some people from my Baptist and Catholic congregations passed me by on the streets, it was a stranger, a rabbi, who extended a helping hand. I spent a year homeless, a year that etched indelible lessons about compassion and resilience.

With the grace of God and the support of that benevolent rabbi, I graduated high school and embarked on a journey to Lincoln University. Yet, the lack of financial support forced me to relinquish my dreams, at least temporarily. The intention to return to my studies, to fulfill my promise to my mother, remained steadfast.

But life happened. One year turned into two, two into five, and five into over a decade. It was only when I got married and left Jersey City for Belle Mead, New Jersey, that I first heard of Rider University. Their mission resonated with me, and so I applied and was accepted.

At this juncture, I was a wife and a mother of three, which made the return to academia a daunting endeavor. In moments of doubt, Rider sent angels to my side.

True educators understand that to nurture the whole student, one must empower them to tap into their higher faculties which are: imagination, intuition, reasoning, will, memory, and perception. My Rider University angels did just that.

My first angel, Dr. Pearlie-Mae Peters, was my English professor. She kindled my love for literature. In moments of despair, she provided me with books that breathed hope into my soul. She imparted three invaluable lessons: to trust my intuition as a divine compass because that was God talking to me, to envision the life I desired because without that vision, life would hand me anything and I deserved better, and to wield my will with laser-like focus so I wouldn't get distracted.

Dr. Victor Thompson, my sociology and criminology professor not only honed my memory and reasoning skills but also encouraged me to take risks. He always stayed after class to talk to me and welcomed my

questions with unwavering patience. I knew I drove him crazy but he never showed it.

And then there was Dr. Frank Rusciano, my political science professor, he was a whirlwind of enthusiasm. He LOVED politics. He taught me the art of active listening and perceiving perspectives. He showed me that two people can witness the same debate and draw divergent but equally valid conclusions. It was mind-boggling then, but today, it guides my worldview. I will always try to see things from other people's perspective.

Before I graduated I met my last angel, Karin Klim, the former Vice President of Rider University's Advancement Division. She demystified the world of development for me, opening a door to a decade-long career that paved the way for my arrival at Rider - not as a student but as a staff member.

My angels at Rider knew nothing of my past, yet they embraced their roles as champions of the whole student. Those experiences are etched in my heart, and they would not have been possible without my Charlotte W. Newcombe Scholarships. I was a recipient in 2009 and 2010. This gift lightened my financial burden and allowed me to devote myself entirely to my studies.

In 2011, I graduated Magna Cum Laude - a testament to a promise kept. I felt my mom's presence and I knew she was proud. Going back and completing my Master's Degree in 2021 was a huge accomplishment and again I felt my mom's presence. These degrees were not only for me but for her! The ethos of 'to whom much is given, much is required' has become the guiding principle of my life. Thank you Mom.

The Charlotte W. Newcombe Scholarship has not only transformed my life but countless other lives as well.

To Gianna, Lindsey, and the entire Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation, your impact on my journey is immeasurable. You enabled me to honor my promise to my mother and push myself to be my best self. I am forever indebted to you. Through your generosity, I found my voice, and now I strive to empower young girls in the inner city to find theirs.

Every student carries a unique story, often unseen. But when we approach them with the entirety of their whole being in mind, we wield the power to shape their lives positively. Thank you.

It is my great honor to introduce Rider University President Dr. Greg Dell'Omo.."