

Remarks by Sasha B. Kramer '94
2022 John and Elizabeth Phillips Award recipient

Good morning everyone. It is such a privilege and an honor to be here and I am so grateful to the selection committee, the academy and my classmates from 1994 who have reached out to share their love, their support, their memories. Throughout this talk I am going to celebrate this opportunity. I have to acknowledge some very special people in my life, some of whom I am lucky enough to have here today and some who always walk with me in spirit no matter where in the world they may be.

I first want to acknowledge my mom and dad who are here in the audience. I stand here today because of the exemplary way in which they have lived their own lives, because from a young age they taught me that compassion and kindness were as important as ambition and intellect. I stand here today because of their unshakable faith in me. Believing in someone is the greatest gift you can ever give and I am so thankful to my parents for always believing in me.

I want as well to thank my sister who has been a model of tenacity and tolerance and continues to inspire me with her work with homeless populations around the US. She consistently reminds me that it is essential to be able to look beyond people's circumstances and actions to find the goodness within them that is the hallmark of humanity.

I also want to acknowledge all of you in this room. Standing in this Assembly Hall brings back so many memories. For some of you this is your first year. I wonder if any of you have moments where you feel as intimidated and out of place as I did. I grew up in rural upstate NY where the coolest possible thing in the early 1990s was to have

rock solid bangs, the taller the better. I rocked my way into Exeter only to find that a style that had served me so well in middle school was most assuredly NOT a style which impressed my new classmates. I came to this campus with a knowledge of diversity and difference that came from books rather than experience and I sat for the first time at a Harkness table with trepidation born of the uncultivated sense of self-worth of a teenager.

During my time at Exeter my hair may have shrunk but, through the daily practice of sitting at a table with my classmates from a wide diversity of backgrounds, my confidence grew. Never to the extent that my mother would like to see, but in a way that has allowed me to sit with the discomfort of difference, in a way that has reminded me that accepting our own flawed humanity can be a powerful tool for cultivating empathy.

For all of you here today who may sometimes question whether you deserve to be here I want you to know that, if you are ready to take this incredible educational opportunity and leverage it to follow your passion, you are in the right place. If you are ready to leverage that passion through service, then the world will be a better place for you having seized this opportunity, whether it was given to you or whether you fought tooth and nail to get here. So, I encourage every one of you in this room today to nurture a belief in yourself, while at the same time uncomfortably embracing the weaknesses that make you human. There is power in both confidence and humility and to truly make change in this world we must cultivate a balance between the two.

I want to talk to you now about Haiti, the country which I have called home for more than a third of my life. Haiti has been at times my greatest teacher, my harshest critic,

my deepest joy, my most acute heartache and through it all my most powerful inspiration. I first went to Haiti in 2004 as a human rights observer, with much of the same trepidation as when I first came to Exeter. I had no idea what it meant to be a human rights observer, but I knew it was something I had always wanted to be. I had wanted to visit Haiti since I was a teenager reading novels by Edwige Daniticat. I was inspired by the country's historical significance as home to the first successful slave rebellion in history. I wanted to better understand how such a small country could forever change the course of global history. I went to Haiti to accompany prodemocracy demonstrators who were seeking international observers as they demonstrated against a repressive coup regime. During my first visit to Haiti I learned that to be a human rights observer, you do not have to have studied human rights, the most important skill you will need is an open heart and a willingness to listen. And I learned that, despite all of the acute human rights abuses happening at the time, the most pervasive human rights abuse in Haiti, and globally, is poverty. And, while I witnessed terrible suffering, I also witnessed true courage. And one of the people who will always represent that courage to me, I am honored to have in the room today, Daniel Tillias could you please stand. Daniel was one of the first people I met in Haiti, he has spent his life advocating for peace, education and development in his community of Cite Soleil all the while inspiring a new generation of leaders both within Haiti and through his global outreach. I am honored to have him as a friend, a board member and a mentor.

I spend a lot of time talking about my work in sanitation and ecology and for those of you who want to know more, I would be delighted to share, but it's so refreshing to stand before you today and not talk about the details of what I do, but rather share with you the ways in which my time in Haiti and my work with Haitian communities

has shaped my worldview. We only have a few minutes and I want to take that time to tell you about the greatest lessons that Haiti has taught me which I hope can be relevant to your lives, both now and as you grow into global citizens.

I want to talk about empathy, perspective, and perseverance. I first went to Haiti trained as a scientist. Much of my academic training focused on objective observation, but Haiti quickly taught me that emotional intelligence, the ability to empathize with others, no matter how painful, was the most valuable tool for building the relationships that are pivotal for making change. The most brilliant intellectual argument can never be won without understanding and relating to those whose experience is different from your own.

Haiti has also given me perspective. We all face our own personal demons and challenges, however on my darkest days I am inspired to keep pushing forward by the everyday heroism of my team who literally walk through burning roadblocks to ensure sanitation to families cut off by insecurity.

And Haiti has taught me perseverance. It has reminded me that the work of equity is the work of generations. Undoing centuries of inequality is a lifetime commitment, it requires a dedication that takes strength in small victories and the tenacity to persist in the face of immeasurable setbacks.

And finally, and perhaps most concretely, Haiti has given me my family. Quite literally in the sense that I met my husband Anthony in Haiti in 2010 at a government sanitation meeting. A brilliant engineer, Anthony was in Haiti as part of the response to the 2010 earthquake working with Doctors Without Borders. We shared a

commitment to justice, a passion for social engagement and he just plain makes me laugh. And now we share a son, Biko, who has grown up with an exposure to the breadth of humanity that I experienced only as an adult. It is my privilege to watch him wrestle with the complexity of his experience and to see the ways in which it shapes him. And Haiti has given me my chosen family, my friends, my colleagues, my mentors for which I will be eternally grateful.

I'd like to come back to the Academy now and I have a special thanks to share with my classmates from 1994. Though I have fallen out of touch with many of you during my time in Haiti, this award has given me the invaluable opportunity to reconnect. Through the generous efforts of Paul Bamert, Charlotte Holton and others, my classmates have collectively raised over \$6,000 as a show of solidarity for the SOIL team's work in Haiti. I am beyond honored and this has been both a concrete and symbolic reminder of the power we have when we come together in community.

And I want to thank the students who I had a chance to meet yesterday who reminded me of the ways in which Exeter uniquely cultivates an intellectual and emotional curiosity. Thank you all for listening and sharing your questions and insights. Standing on this stage today would not have been as easy without your kind assurances and your promise to come out and support me today. To that end, I would like to do a standing Assembly Check for all of you who I had the chance to meet yesterday – can you please stand.

In closing I would like to say that I have never been more appreciative of the gift of education than I am this year. As I stand before you today, millions of school children

in Haiti are facing an uncertain educational future with schools across the country shut down due to insecurity.

In a world where education should be a right, but remains a privilege, I want to remind you that while this privilege does come with tremendous responsibility, it also brings with it an incredible opportunity. The opportunity to use your privilege and education to make a difference in the lives of others. And I can tell you from experience, that if you choose to use your knowledge in service to humanity, your own life and the lives of those you love will be so much richer for it.

We can each choose to contribute to social change in our own ways. Some of us will change the world through teaching, as Dean Weatherspoon did for me so many years ago, or through sharing our stories as so many wise people did for me from this very stage, or through parenting, as my mother and father did for me and I hope I will do for our son. Some, like the tireless waste treatment team that I work with will change the world by living their lives on the frontlines of the struggle, and for others like myself, we will have the opportunity to support change through accompaniment, be it financial or practical. For me there has been no greater satisfaction in life than walking with others on the path of justice.