

“Knowledge is Power”

PBK Student Oration – 2022

Nia Kamau

Good afternoon. My name is Nia Kamau; I am a Human Rights and International Studies double major, also minoring in Arabic, Public Policy and International Affairs, and Economics. I am a senior and last year was a junior inductee into Phi Beta Kappa.

If you can't tell, I am so excited to be here. First of all, I want to again say congratulations to all of the scholars preparing to be inducted. I know several of you and your stories and so I understand that accomplishments like these can be hard fought. I am not just talking about all nighters, but about the many students balancing academic achievements with side jobs, adulting, personal losses, and other challenges of life. I hope you all truly savor this moment and celebrate yourselves.

Many of us came to college and now find ourselves in this room for various reasons. When I was growing up, it was never a question of whether or not I would pursue higher education. It was expected of me by my parents, my grandparents who didn't have that opportunity, and it was an expectation of my community. I was taught early on that knowledge is the most powerful tool one could ever yield. A lot of the messaging I received about this came from the Black Church I grew up in. I was raised in a church founded over 150 years ago by enslaved Black People who started their community on three pillars: salvation, liberation, and education. They knew from their own experience that education was key to not only their personal freedom but also the liberation of their offspring. I am who I am due to their leadership and vision for Black America. Their legacy played on into my childhood in various ways. For instance, many Sundays starting from when I was old enough to walk, I would be brought to the front of our church sanctuary with other children, and all the adults would say to us and we would repeat back: “My mind is a pearl, I can learn anything in the world” and things like

“Readers are leaders and leaders are readers” and, my favorite, “Knowledge is power, knowledge is power, knowledge is power.” These affirmations that my community planted in me starting from when I was a toddler play in my mind regularly even to this day, motivating me. Part of what they were trying to teach us is that the purpose of education is not for personal empowerment alone, but for the empowerment of those around you. They taught us speeches by Sojourner Truth, Rev Dr Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and Oprah Winfrey, showing what it looks like when intellectual prowess is invested into creating a better world for the next generation.

These lessons define me, determining my choice to major in Human Rights and my next step of serving our country abroad as a US diplomat. And it is this lesson that I want to pass on to you today.

This room is full of all kinds of students, from English and Political Science students to double majors also studying business and the arts. If you didn't already know: newsflash, you don't have to be a Human Rights student to use your education to make this world better for someone else. Honestly, everyone, no matter if they have a primary school diploma or a PhD can make an impact but those of us privileged to pursue higher education and refine an intellectual expertise have an opportunity to make a unique kind of high level change, whether it be by defending refugees in the court room, hiring formerly incarcerated individuals into your business, being a doctor trained to identify the thousands of sex trafficking victims who come through hospitals, or using your DISC writing skills to raise awareness about climate change, volunteer your time writing nonprofit grant applications, or persuading your city council to invest in racial equity projects. The list goes on.

You were selected to be here today because you're a high achiever who models the Phi Beta Kappa motto: “Love of Learning is the Guide to Life.” My challenge for us is to not just love

learning for the personal satisfaction or because we like the admiration we get from others for being smart or we're information junkies or we like winning debates, none of which are inherently bad. But I also invite you to get excited about learning because it empowers you to do good, a good that is sustainable, good that maximizes its impact, good that is achieved through ethical calculations and that is data driven. We have both a responsibility and a choice to offer this to our communities. I am here because a group of people with chains around their necks rose up and promised themselves to make tomorrow a brighter day for me and for you.

Congratulations again on your accomplishments and let's all use them wisely. Our knowledge is our power.