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**Presidential Inauguration: *Still Making the Choice to Change the World*
Remarks by Helene D. Gayle, MD, MPH
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Thank you for all of the kind words and introduction.

Let me start by expressing gratitude. Anyone who knows me at all knows that I am almost constitutionally incapable of being in a room like this and *not* acknowledging all the people who have been important in my life.

But in the interest of time, please just know that if you ever opened a door for me or opened your home to me, if you gave me an encouraging word or hug when I needed it most, if you lifted me up when I doubted myself, if you are here as one of the platform guests, if you are a member of our board led by the incomparable Roz Brewer – I thank you.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the phenomenal Spelman Presidents who came before me.

And I am privileged to have had a *personal* relationship with the past five presidents – starting with Don Stewart, who is represented here today by his wife, Isabel and their son Jay.

- To Johnnetta Cole, who boldly and bravely ushered in a new era of Sister Presidents.
- Audrey Manley, my fellow pediatrician, and public health colleague.
- Beverly Tatum, my partner in the civic landscape of Atlanta when she was leading Spelman, and I was leading CARE.

- And Mary Schmidt Campbell, whose thoughtful guidance provided me with the knowledge and confidence to take on this awesome responsibility.

I will do my best to carry forward your amazing legacy of leadership.

Now you have already heard that I have accumulated a lot of titles over the years. But the ones I cherish most have been given to me by many of you here today: sister, aunt, cousin, godmother, namesake, mentor, friend, and more recently, wife, stepmother, and grandmother.

These titles mean more to me than you may ever know.

I also want to acknowledge two people who are not with us any longer physically but are still ever present for me. You gave me the unique and special title of daughter. My parents Jacob and Marietta Gayle.

They raised me and my four siblings to value education and to use that education to make a positive contribution to society.

My father was intensely devoted to his children and his community. Armed with a high school education and night school business courses, he started a barber and beauty supply business that became a staple of Buffalo's Black Business community. While it didn't afford great luxury, it allowed all five of his children to complete college and graduate level education.

My mother was quite educated for her times, with an undergraduate degree from Fisk University and a master's degree in social work from Columbia University. She was a peripatetic seeker of knowledge, exposing us to new places, theories, religions, people, and movements. She was largely responsible for our identity as global, social justice-minded citizens.

Our "Up South" Buffalo community was a special place to grow up and be nurtured. Like my parents, most of their friends migrated North to escape the segregated South. Most returned to the South to attend historically black colleges and universities that were the most welcoming options for their generation.

Some of my own generation followed that same path and went to HBCUs.

But our parents also fought for their children to have the right to walk through doors that had not been open to them.

And so, I found my way to Barnard College.

There I grew in my understanding of myself as a woman, and I developed a sense of solidarity with movements to empower women around our globe.

Thanks to the strong pre-med program at Barnard, I found a way to channel my vague notion of liberating all oppressed people into a more tangible way to contribute to positive social change.

Along the way, I have had many professional homes, and each has taught me something different. My first, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, taught me the importance of developing true partnership with the communities we serve. At the Gates Foundation, I came to appreciate the unique role of philanthropy. And then to CARE, which deepened my commitment to empowering girls and women.

From there I went to what I anticipated would be---- okay, truth be told, what my husband *really hoped* would be----the final leg of my career journey: the Chicago Community Trust. There, I had the opportunity to apply philanthropy to closing the ever-widening wealth gap in Chicago and our nation.

Okay, by now you've figured out that I am an optimist who truly believes we can change the world -- and that I like to surround myself with people who are working to do just that.

So, given that, I can't imagine a better place for me than right here, right now.

You know, I have the unique vantage point of both working and living on Spelman's campus. I get to see the diverse range of our students. But what is common to all of them is that they walk with a sense of confidence, a sense of purpose.

When you meet a Spelman student, she doesn't just say her name. A typical introduction will go like this:

“Hello, President Gayle. My name is Alana Jones, class of 2024, from Kansas City, Missouri. I am a double-major in computer science and biology on the pre-med track.

I plan to become a gynecologist and work on eliminating health disparities, with a focus on finding new technologies to reducing maternal mortality among Black women.”

Wow!

In a society where women, especially Black women, are still made to believe we should shrink and hide who we are, Spelman teaches you to believe you actually belong in any room you walk into.

One student told me it was her Wakanda experience – a grounding and sense of confidence that is impossible to shake.

“I will leave Spelman and have the armor that I need to shield me in any experience,” she said. “I will leave Spelman ready to take on the world!”

This is exactly what I imagine our founders, Sophia Packard and Harriet Giles, had in mind back in 1881 when they were seized with what was a bold and revolutionary idea for the time: to provide formerly enslaved Black women a stellar education and career opportunities.

And to equip those students to engage in their community, respond to its needs, and become self-reliant in solving its problems.

We hear that thinking echo across the generations in the song sung by our fabulous glee club:

Why put off for tomorrow what I can do today? Why wait for another when I can pave the way?

Today’s Spelman reflects both that early vision and the changes in the world in the last 142 years.

We continue to offer a premiere liberal arts education that develops learners who can think across disciplines to find answers to today’s complex challenges.

We value our Christian roots while embracing the full range of faith traditions, including believers and non-believers.

We have expanded our appreciation of our sisterhood to embrace a broader understanding of gender and gender identity.

And while we are historically Black and committed to the education of women of African descent, our doors are open to any woman who wants an educational experience grounded in the understanding of Black history and culture.

This kind of adaptability and intentionality has rooted us in our educational mission but also in the world beyond our doors. For every major social, political, or economic challenge our country has faced, Spelman has been there, and our voice has mattered.

It's no surprise, then, that Spelman College is known far and wide for its excellence. We continue to break records and score high in all the national rankings. And that commitment to the best matters. As our first president and co-founder Sophia Packard famously said, "Spelman women must have a loyal scorn for second best".

But what is most heartening to me is that Spelman has become an incubator for Black women leaders at a time when we need diverse, experienced voices at the table more than ever.

The renowned philosopher Trevor Noah said it well – and for the sake of keeping our rating PG, I will paraphrase:

"If you truly want to learn about America or anywhere else, go talk to a Black woman. Black women can't afford to mess around because they have to shoulder the consequences if things get screwed up. So, if you truly want to know what to do or how to do it, or maybe the best way, the most equitable way, ask a Black woman."

I mentioned that student who told me that Spelman was her Wakanda experience. She and her other sisters will leave here ready to take on the world – and to *contribute* -- her voice, her skills, her talents, all of which our world desperately needs.

I am convinced this is why even students who get accepted to some of our nation's most elite institutions choose Spelman. Here, their primary task is simply to work hard and be the excellent students we fully expect them to be. No need to spend

energy hiding their authentic selves. No need to explain who they are. No judgement. Only encouragement and high expectations.

Of course, this goes hand-in-hand with their second task: To wrap arms around their fellow sisters.

When I was in medical school we were told, “Look to the left, look to the right. Only one of you will be here at graduation.” At Spelman, we say, “Look to the left, look to the right and remember: It is your responsibility to assure that each of you makes it to the finish line.”

That is the Spelman sisterhood. That is the Spelman difference.

Now who helps make this magic happen?

Behind all our wonderful students are extraordinary faculty, administrators and staff who put in countless hours because they believe in our students and the life-changing potential Spelman offers.

I am honored and humbled to join this brilliant, dedicated group of people as we look forward to the next Spelman chapter and navigate the issues of the future.

Our song invites us to do just that. It says: *Spelman look around and see where changes need to be.*

And we know changes are badly needed. Not dissimilar from the time when Spelman was conceived, we are facing one of the most divisive and difficult periods in our nation, and in our world. We are seeing reversals of hard-won struggles. If you are a person who believes in and values democracy, rule of law, facts, history, women, women’s bodily autonomy, Black and other minoritized communities, equity and fairness, then you would agree we are living in troubled times.

Now, more than ever *we need Spelman women* who are ready to be in the room and at the table where decisions about our future, our collective destiny are being made.

We need your brilliance, your boldness, and your ability to be analytic and evidenced-based, even when those around you prefer shallow sound bites and sloganeering.

While I will be guided by what our community feels is most important to focus on, there are some things I hope we can accomplish during my tenure:

- **First, I want to help ensure that we continue to value a liberal arts education and make it more accessible.**

We know that a liberal arts education is critical for a functioning democracy and for developing critical thinkers and problem solvers. While we excel in the sciences and mathematics, we are not STEM only. We also excel in the arts and humanities and social sciences.

But we also know that the cost of a college education continues to be a barrier for some of our best and brightest students. At a time when our applicant pool continues to increase, we must do more to increase scholarships and our endowment and ensure that financial need is never the barrier to matriculation at Spelman, now or in the future. Could we become the first need-blind HBCU? It is a vision I want to work towards.

- **Second, I want to help ensure Spelman can continue to be a leader in the health of women, especially Black women.**

We have always been a leader in producing students who go on to careers in health. In fact, thirty years ago, one of the most important women's health organizations, the Black Women's Health Project, now Black Women's Health Imperative, was founded on this campus by Billye Avery to focus on the disparate health outcomes of Black women.

Today, with ever-widening disparities in health, we have a special opportunity to double-down on our efforts, to be a leader in the fight to understand – and improve – the trajectory of the physical and mental health of Black women here and around the world.

- **Third, given the strong link that we know exists between physical health and economic health, I want to help ensure that we do more to advance the economic health of the West End community that is our home.**

We have done a lot already with our service programs, especially in enhancing reading and math skills in our local schools. But we can do more to increase economic growth and vitality.

We recently launched the Center for Black Entrepreneurship – a collaboration between Spelman and Morehouse with a mission to train and produce a new class of Black entrepreneurial talent. While it's first responsibility is to our students, I believe it can be a resource more broadly bringing the power of entrepreneurship to catalyze economic growth in our own neighborhood.

- **Fourth, while 77 percent of our students have some travel and study abroad experience during their time at Spelman, I want us to be even more global.**

In a world where many young women are still denied the right to an education, we can do more to bridge that gap. Data show that nations that have higher numbers of women who are educated and in leadership positions are more stable, more equitable and less corrupt. I am convinced that Spelman can play a role in helping to bring about that transformation in global leadership. We can do more through new platforms like eSpelman and new partnerships to go beyond the walls of Spelman to expand our ability to bring the world to Spelman and Spelman to the world.

- **Finally, I want us to continue to use our scholarship and our voice to speak out and act on the critical issues of our day.**

We can't sit back as we see our world go in a direction that is contrary to our very founding.

We do not exist just to have excellent students. We exist because we are the hopes and dreams of our ancestors made manifest.

We are here because we believe we not only have a choice but a responsibility to change the world to be more just, more equitable and more fair.

Well, if it is not obvious, I couldn't be more excited about the opportunity we have together to do all that and more.

That's why I'm here.

I am here to honor the vision and mission of the founders.

I am here to continue the legacy of all the past presidents who made it possible for me to inherit an institution with few problems and many possibilities.

I am here to let Spelman alumnae know that their beloved alma mater is in good hands – and that they will have many reasons to continue to be proud of her.

I am here to support our outstanding faculty, administrators, and staff – among the best and brightest education professionals in the world.

I am here to send a clear message to current and prospective donors that an investment in Spelman is an investment for the ages.

I am here to be a faithful advocate and ally for our current students – the 2,300 beautiful, intelligent, poised and committed women whose faces I see every day.

And I am here for the countless girls whose faces I have not yet seen – and may never see. They are the 10-, 11- and 12-year-olds who are just beginning to formulate their ideas about how *they* want to change the world. It's been said that “the true meaning of life is to plant trees under whose shade you do not expect to sit.” I could not agree more.

So, my Spelman family and friends, I am here for the same reason this institution has always been here: to ensure there is a special place – *that there will always be a special place* – where a young Black woman with a dream of making the world better will be nurtured and affirmed, educated wholly, and encouraged to be and become her best and authentic self.

It is an amazing calling. And I am humbled to accept this mantle of leadership.

Since being here, every day, my love and respect for Spelman grows.

My choice is Spelman. Thank you for making me your choice as well.

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