

It is my distinct honor to be here with you tonight, as we celebrate our ties to Purnell, express pride in our beautiful school, reminisce the wonderful memories that an old dairy farm in Pottersville evokes in us, and to toast to the promise that the future holds for us as an institution and for each of us as individuals. Thank you for joining us at this lovely event, and thank you to the DeLuca family for helping to make it possible for us to gather and mingle as a community.

I joined the Purnell family just over five years ago, as the Spanish teacher who opted to trade in sunny, bustling southern California for a more rural, shall we say, “seasonal” experience in Pottersville, New Jersey. The students were not shy in telling me that I was crazy, and I’m not going to lie and tell you I got out or drove a whole lot that first winter, but I felt an instant connection to Purnell.

During my interview in the summer of 2005 I was first drawn to the dedication and warmth of my soon-to-be new colleagues, whose devotion to the school was apparent as they took only short breaks from preparing for the big 40th reunion celebration to question me about my intentions with Purnell.

A few months later, that first fall, when the students arrived and I experienced my first orientation weekend, I was positively overwhelmed by

the girls' unabashed enthusiasm and general candor with each other. It was this first weekend at Purnell when I began to appreciate the true benefits of an all-girl high school experience.

And as we all settled into classes the following week I was repeatedly impressed with my Spanish students' willingness to take a chance with their new teacher and her fairly non-traditional teaching methods, especially since many of them had shared with me their horror stories of being embarrassed or feeling stupid in previous foreign language classes at other schools. I adored their eagerness when I asked them to sing cutesy songs in order to memorize vocabulary, and I basked in the glow of my students' creativity when they crafted picture books in lieu of traditional pen-and-paper tests.

The mission of Purnell School, created by its founders, embodied by this community that I so luckily happened upon, has always aimed to guide young women to discover their best selves and live their passions. Lytt and Sis Gould's vision was to create a place for girls to take risks, be supported by loving faculty members who would teach them at all hours in the day to realize their potential, reach that potential, and go out and make something special of themselves. What a wonderful goal he had to focus students on the good stuff, the stuff of dreams—the things that really inspire and

motivate us to carve out a meaningful place in the world. It was this mission, being lived every day, by my colleagues, and by my students, that assured me right from the beginning that I had become a part of something unique and wonderful.

We didn't start calling it "The Affinities Program" until 2004, but Purnell's focus on helping students discover and utilize their strengths and passions has existed from the beginning. In 2007, two years after joining the Purnell community, my own affinity for curriculum innovation was noticed, and I was happily charged with the task of creating a comprehensive, four-year program to more formally help students harness their personal interests and talents to take ownership of high school and their futures.

There are three key parts to The Affinities Program. First, all students, throughout their time at Purnell, participate in Affinities Seminars, which take place during the normal school day. The ninth grade students begin their high school careers by focusing on strategies for building strong, healthy relationships that enable them to express their true selves, build self-esteem, and form a support system that is so key for adolescents. As the year progresses, ninth graders shift to spending a significant amount of seminar time discovering the ways they best learn, study, and express

their understanding. Students learn how to talk about their learning strengths so they may share this information with teachers and become comfortable with self-advocating. In tenth grade, students determine the ways in which their relationship and learning strengths translate into teamwork situations, and they participate in real-world simulations that require them to put to use their talents so their group may succeed. We have a beautifully revitalized high and low ropes course to help students truly understand what it means to depend on others and be depended upon—to work as a team. As students transition into eleventh grade, they synthesize their personal understanding of their strengths to explore possible careers and search for and secure a summer internship that enables them to dabble in a career of interest. The girls' senior year at Purnell is dedicated to creating a personal message about their strengths and affinities in the form of the oh-so-important college application essay and their senior speech, which has become a Purnell tradition and an important rite of passage for all seniors to address the community in The Carney Center before graduating. As the teacher of these seminars, through my role as the internship and senior speech coordinator, and as a dorm parent I get to know each Purnell student in a very meaningful way, and I get to witness the growth and transformation that happens as a result

of focusing on strengths and self-improvement year after year of high school.

I want to give you an idea of the kind of activities students participate in when in Affinities Seminar. If someone handed you a piece of paper and asked you to give him or her directions to get to your home, how would you go about that? Who would have written a bulleted list? Maybe some of you would have drawn a map, or rather than writing a list, your directions would have looked like a story, complete with adverbs like “first,” “then,” and “lastly.” Who would have preferred to say it aloud? The way my students go about completing this assignment gives them and me an interesting snapshot into their learning strengths. If you drew a map, that likely means you are a strong visual learner, who in a math class, requires lots of diagrams and pictures, and who in English class probably would benefit from watching the movie version of the book you’re reading. The person whose directions look like a story would probably benefit greatly in math class if she were given an opportunity to talk about what she’s just learned with a nearby classmate. And for those of you who would have written your directions like a step-by-step list, it may be helpful for you to write the steps to each problem on your math test before attempting to solve it. After completing an activity like this, and reflecting on what the heck it means,

students become powerful advocates for their learning by asking the teacher to help them in the way they know they learn best, and by automatically utilizing their best learning strategies during each and every learning task.

The second important aspect of The Affinities Program is our demystification process. Every student, during her first year at Purnell, is demystified. This means one faculty member, often the student's advisor, spends a good deal of time and energy compiling data from teachers, parents, and the student herself so that the faculty member may identify trends of strengths and weaknesses in the student's learning. In a casual, one-on-one meeting, the student and the faculty member have a conversation about the findings and discuss strategies for helping strengthen both the student's strengths and areas of weakness. After a demystification, Purnell girls are empowered to talk about their areas of strength and weakness, and they are armed with strategies for self-improvement, and their teachers are trained to know the best way to implement this information in their classes. I have the privilege of coordinating and overseeing these demystification meetings, and every year I am inspired by the faculty members' uncanny ability to shock the students with their spot-on determinations of strengths and weaknesses,

and I so admire the students' openness to really examine what may be improved and take steps to do so.

The final key aspect of The Affinities Program is that students are provided with ample opportunities to work in areas of strength, try out new interests, and deeply pursue their passions. I am certain that many of you alums here with us tonight remember your favorite Purnell club, activity, sport, or trip abroad that gave you an opportunity to dabble in your affinities. Some of the clubs and activities we currently offer on campus that may not have been around when you were include Purnell Greens, which is our environmental awareness club, Knitting Club, and Steppers, our recently formed step troupe. And of course students can still enjoy Purnell cornerstones, like Shoots and Strawberries, art activity, yearbook, Adlibbers and technical theatre, horseback riding, student council, Dance Synthesis, and many more.

In addition to discovering and utilizing affinities in the many clubs and activities on campus, students are also highlighted each Wednesday at morning meeting. During what has been deemed "Affinities Wednesday," one student shows off to the community what is great and unique about her. In the past few years we have learned about students' summer internships, vacations and summer camps, in-class achievements, and out-

of-class hobbies and talents. Sometimes students work as a group to present, and sometimes they share individually. No matter the format, it is an incredible vehicle for the community to learn about it's members in a meaningful way.

New to the Purnell community this year, twice a month a variety of professional women come to speak at school about their careers, and offer advice to the girls about what they can do to succeed in their particular field. Also, through a number of contacts with the greater New Jersey and New York community I have been able to offer small groups of students shadowing experiences and one-day internships with professionals in fields that the girls feel they may one day want to pursue.

When I discovered Purnell, Project Exploration was of particular interest to me. Where else do students get three whole weeks to concentrate on an area of study that really excites them? Where else do teachers get to teach in such a meaningful, in-depth way? During last year's Project Ex I guided seven girls to learn what it takes to be an elementary school teacher, as they wrote lesson plans, observed classrooms in nearby schools, and prepared to teach their own class in the final week of Project Ex. Are there any alums here who traveled during the time previously known as "immersion," or during Project Ex? Any parents

who will send or who have sent students abroad? I have had the opportunity to travel to Costa Rica and Mexico with groups of Purnell students, so I am keenly aware of the amazing amount growth and learning that takes place when you are taken out of your comfort zone, and thrown into a new culture. This year I will take fourteen students to explore the Galapagos and study Spanish in Ecuador. Ten other students will make the long trek to Zambia to volunteer in two orphanages, while others on campus will put on a musical production, or learn about New York City history, or learn about the science behind the show CSI. World travel, and rich, meaningful classes and extracurricular activities have always made Purnell a unique experience, and we remain committed to the ideal that often the most important learning happens outside the classroom.

Lets face it, although as high school students it may have felt like we'd never escape those four walls of the classroom, we understand now that learning and growing has only a little to do with sitting at a desk with a paper and pencil. Rather, I think that most of us have found that we've learned the most by getting out there and trying new things, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing, reflecting on our failures and successes, and doing it better the next time around. I also believe that we get the most enjoyment out of life when we're doing the things that make us feel good,

energized and alive. When we have the opportunity to spend time doing the things we love, the success becomes even sweeter, and the failures become mere steppingstones to bigger and better things. High school students are asked to be experts in many different areas, as we require them to take all kinds of classes, but after high school we are given the freedom to CHOOSE our area of expertise, and often that feels so much better; more comfortable, and more fulfilling.

I am proud that Purnell recognizes, and has recognized since its inception, the importance of helping high school girls realize that our strengths and passions will serve as our most important compass as we travel through life. Although some time must be devoted to addressing our deficits and strengthening our weaknesses, and putting pen to paper, I believe it is equally important to spend time and energy exploring the fun and engaging aspects of life. Purnell girls are encouraged to explore potential areas of expertise both in and out of the classroom, and to work hard at developing their skills, with the expectation that they will develop talents and passions to carry them throughout their lives. After all, the purpose of school should not be to get better at school. The point of school is to be better at life.

I often brag that I have the absolute best job on campus because I get to see students make life-altering discoveries about themselves, and I have the honor of helping to guide them on a meaningful path to utilize this knowledge. And so many parents and other adults remark how they wish there'd been something like this around when they were in high school, as it took them many years to discover what would truly fulfill them in life. At Purnell our students don't have to wait to harness their personal prowess. They are offered the time and tools to try new things, hone their talents, and discover passions. Cheers to Purnell, for giving this gift.

Thank you.