

StartUp Africa Women's Entrepreneurship Keynote

#Reset17: Launch the transformed you

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By JoAnn Rolle, Ph.D.

Dean School of Business Medgar Evers College, CUNY

Please join with me in thanking all the speakers from today's session.

I bring you greetings from President, Dr. Rudolf Crew, Provost Augustine Okereke, and a host of Medgar Evers College faculty, staff, and students.

We at Medgar Evers College owe our gratitude to those of you who were here with us at the 2016 StartUp Africa conference. You inspired us then and you continue to inspire us now. One of the students is quoted as saying the conference changed her life. So tell me sisters and brothers how do you calculate the "return on investment" of a changed life? You don't – you just do it.

I am reminded of the August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1963 March on Washington for Jobs & Freedom when the legendary Mahalia Jackson sang the old Negro spiritual, "How I got over". A more contemporary quote from our Brooklyn, New York brother Jay-Z, "difficult takes a day, impossible takes a week."

When we left StartUp Africa in January 2016, we hit the reset button and launched to do the impossible. We broaden our knowledge of global entrepreneurship by traveling to ten countries; we collaborated with colleagues and published ten articles; we participated in approximately 10 pitch competitions; we convened two international conferences and participated in many more.

But this was not our story in 2015; I am sharing this with you today because I want you to know you can re-invent, re-invigorate, re-boot, re-start your story any where any day any time... and now is your time to hit that re-set button.

So let me share with you our 2015 story.

Our students were willing and ready to travel and study abroad but funding was a challenge. In 2015 16 students

signed up to travel to the US China Summit of which 6 of our students were prepared to stay for entrepreneurship internships, but as funding was not available, not one student experienced this life changing opportunity.

Today I am grateful for the experience of loss and desperation for it was that pit of impossibility that motivated us to seek, knock, and pray for the opening of doors. I stand before you and testify that last year four MEC students went to Beijing, China in the spring and 10 students were in Beijing, China; Tokyo, Japan and Bangkok, Thailand -- in one trip in the fall.

How did we go from our history of no funding, no resources, and no programs?. We never lost faith in the young people we serve; we understood that they are our future; they are our hope for survival for the turbulent times to come. During the summer and fall of 2015 we cold called foundations, corporations, and other donors. A few times we were invited to submit proposals.

We told our story over and over. We received rejection after rejection. Finally at the end of 2015 we had three awards, which changed destiny for those young people we serve.... and StartUp Africa 2016 was our first stop.

So let StartUp Africa 2017 be your first stop – hit the #Reset17 button and launch the transformed you.

I told the group last year that

Two of my most favorite quotes come from Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"Do not go where the path may lead...go instead where there is no path and leave a trail"

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us.

For many of you are trailblazers in your education, careers, and businesses.... for many of you there is no family history of entrepreneurship... you must look deep inside your soul for its passion to guide you, grow you, and sustain you.... you must prepare yourself to believe in the impossible... then you must work harder than you ever worked before. You must be creative, resourceful, and intuitive; you must understand that innovation is a necessity because business as usual is a death sentence in a dynamic global economy.

When I addressed you in 2016 I talked of my great grandmother, a serial entrepreneur, who could not read or write. Later in life she was blind yet --she had vision. I spoke of my own journey of being the first in my family to earn a college degree and now all four of my sisters are being honored this weekend at the University of Miami for producing the largest number of graduates from a single family in the history of the University.

Sisters and Brothers of StartUp Africa 2017, if there is no path... make one... if you find the way blocked... re-tool, seek help, and hit the re-set button to launch the transformed you.

Major corporations are transforming worldwide to grow and sustain in a diverse and dynamic global marketplace. Last week I was at Microsoft in NYC and will share with you their vision of corporate transformation:

“We believe in what people make possible

Our mission is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more.”

How do they plan to execute on such a bold vision – their worldview – their soul is Mobile first and cloud first... they want to re-invent productivity and business processes that innovate and disrupt the status quo... they are customer obsessed – focused on the experience of the customer-- not on the experience of the firm

Microsoft has transformed their value system and their culture is one of

1. Growth mindset vs. fixed mindset
2. Diverse and inclusive is part of their identity understanding that varying backgrounds contribute to successes making a difference

So what can we learn from this global technology giant that started a few decades ago with a small group of entrepreneurs?

1. You must have a vision – you must believe in the transformation – you must believe in your team – but most of all you must believe in your passion to make the journey
2. You must set your mission that is shaped and guided by your vision.. it should be clear... and powered by your soul... because you will have many challenges and obstacles in your path... but if your vision and your soul are aligned... when you fall.... you will rise
3. You must get past the launch mindset. You are here... you have pushed the reset button and you are on your path to growth. You must find ways and strategies to nourish and sustain your growth. Find mentors, network with colleagues, journal, feed your soul.. feed your passion.
4. The world of global business is difference. Diversity of cultures, diversity of skills, diversity of disciplines, and diversity of needs. You must find a way to surround yourself with difference so that you understand the different prisms of opportunity. How can you develop solutions to problems that you don't know exist?
5. Be driven and obsessed by the experience of your customers. Many develop product or services without understanding the customer experience. Re-engineer your products and services to start with the customer experience, enhance it, improve it, ... then bank on it!

So in your growth mindset, I encourage you to shed the cloak of usual/ normalcy -- become extraordinary storytellers delivering your message of excellence on demand, live, digital, and in print. You should have a broad global footprint that shares your story facilitated by digital and other media.

Become fearless voyagers seeking adventures of the unknown and difference. Channel your passion to strategies that create, innovate, and disrupt the status quo. Be willing to fail, as most entrepreneurs fail before they succeed. Be willing to learn, as you learn you continue to grow and improve your ability to sustain and adapt to change. Be willing to be comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty for there you will find opportunity. Finally be willing to change for in

change you will find growth both personally and professionally.

So in the shadows of history, we come humbly before you our institution bearing the name of a heroic leader who helped transform the destiny of many lives. Many of you may have heard of Medgar Evers the man; he was a civil rights and social justice advocate willing to fight for change. He was a believer in the power of a vision for justice. He is quoted as saying, “you can kill a man, but you can’t kill an idea.” Medgar Evers the man was shot down and killed but his vision of change and social justice lives on at Medgar Evers College. I will briefly share our mission through the life of one of our recent graduates.

Christian Waterman. Christian is an only child and has been the only male in his household most of his life. Christian is also a third generation resident of Ebbetts Fields apartments across the street from our campus; between his mother and grandmother they have been residents for almost 40 years –Christian’s dream, as the very first College graduate in his family, is to lift the family out of Ebbetts Fields—the world that they have all known for a lifetime into a new place that will be their home alone.

Christian describes himself as a social entrepreneur.

Tired of guns, drugs and violence in his neighborhood, Christian started his company in order to “ save the world, eliminate poverty and establish peace.” –his words not mine. How do you prepare any student for such broad ambition?

Christian came to Medgar but like many of our students – life happens... he stopped out .. Took some time off... Many don’t know ... but its heroes like our fallen Dean Derrick Griffith, who died tragically, that worked relentlessly to reclaim many of our students so that they don’t fall through the proverbial cracks. Dean Griffith reached out to Christian and encouraged him to finish the credits he needed to graduate. Christian once again came home to Medgar. When I met Christian I asked him what did he want to do? His answer was that “ I want to scale up my business.”

This young man was already thinking of growth and sustainability... much of what you have discussed here today. But how do you go beyond recognizing the need for growth to executing on growth? As I shared earlier, you seek help; you re-tool; and transform. Christian graduated from Medgar in May 2015. Christian’s business, however continued being

supported while he also completed his MBA with honors August 2016. When he was done, he came back to support and help grow the businesses of his fellow peers who are here with you today. Omeil, Roland and Patricia who pitched earlier.

Our students are the living legacy and spirit of Medgar Wiley Evers...seeking a bold vision of social justice and equality ... fortified by a determination not to quit no matter what... and focused on the idea of change for the social good... Our students and the generations that follow will face technology that we have not seen in our life times.

The next generation will experience a new revolution based upon artificial intelligence, nano science, nano technology etc. That will fundamentally change work as we know it today. Many traditional jobs will be replaced by a new generation of robots and highly sophisticated computers. The Goggles of the World, the Microsofts of the World and the IBMs of the world don't have enough capacity (or desire) to hire all the Christian Waterman's of the world that Colleges & Universities produce. We must become our own job creators, job innovators, and entrepreneurial disruptors in a world that is not colorblind. Like Medgar Evers, we must be willing to stand tall in our conviction that change must come or the next generation will perish in a growing class of poverty and despair. Education was once the great equalizer... now you will find a growing educated underclass with limited opportunities ... this is not a one college, one country, or one race peril... it is global crises faced in Latin America, Africa, Asia and yes and in North America.

In New York city, specifically, Brooklyn where we are from, Medgar Evers College was founded to serve the needs of the community. We connect to the community through multiple units such as the

Pipeline Program, (a kindergarten to career model of education for schools, students, parents and educators); the Center for Black Literature; The Caribbean Research Center; and the DuBois Center for Public Policy and the Center for Law and Social Justice.

You will hear of the re-gentrification / transformation of Brooklyn... know that it is not transforming the same for everyone. Many small business entrepreneurs in our community did not adapt, did not change, did not re-tool, and have been swallowed in a sea of obsolescence and slumber in the graveyard of shutdown storefronts.

In the true spirit of community economic development, Medgar has joined the Brooklyn Navy yard in a partnership to

accelerate the growth of tech based businesses through it's StartUp New York program and serves as a hub for innovation. In the first cohort there are five Startup NY companies with which we are affiliated. These companies all revolve around technology, biotech and some form of sustainability. Of the five companies, two were started by white males, one by a white female, one by three black males and one by a black female. Talk about diversity!

The college's affiliation with these companies involves four potential relationships: (1) internships leading to 21st century jobs and careers for Medgar students; (2) collaboration with our faculty on economic development initiatives and programmatic research; (3) building through faculty and administrative interconnections new curricula in science, technology, health, business and liberal arts, which will produce interdisciplinary majors benefiting students, faculty and the community of Medgar Evers; (4) certificate and job possibilities offered to community residents who are not students of Medgar but who look to the college as a beacon of economic, intellectual, social and cultural advancement.

Today we come to Nairobi with a spirit of mutual collaboration seeking support in in our joint goals of job creation for our children. Within the last six months we have initiated four international agreements with diverse institutions including Kenyatta University because the world we compete in is beyond Brooklyn, beyond New York, beyond the US... it is global... our children, if they are to survive, like Microsoft must walk and talk in diverse cultures, with diverse skills, and be driven by a fearless obsession to understand the experience of those we serve.

So as you think about the Return on your investment (the ROI) for the time you spent here today, Remember to Push the Reset button and Launch the transformed you – then channel the passion in your soul to grow and sustain the better and brighter world you can create today and every day ..

...but .. If you really want to leverage that ROI.. If you want to change the world... stand with us ...a growing number of dedicated men and women who believe in the vision of global entrepreneurial thinking, creators of opportunity, creators of change... change that transforms destinies of generations to come.

I close with a quote from the great visionary leader Nelson Mandela, "Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again."

You may fall my friends but push the reset button, rise and keep standing.

May God bless and keep you strong!