

Pi Gamma Mu 2017 Triennial Keynote Address: Small's Little Bit of History

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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Clara Small is a retired professor emeritus at Salisbury University and the Second Vice-President of the Pi Gamma Mu Board of Trustees.

**Pi Gamma Mu 2017 Triennial Keynote Address:
Small's Little Bit of History**

Thank you for the kind invitation to speak at Pi Gamma Mu's Triennial Banquet because it is truly an honor to have been asked to speak to this august body, and to, hopefully, offer some advice from lifelong experiences. This is truly an honor to be here, because I am usually giving speeches and talking to various groups about my research and publications regarding African Americans on Delmarva and not discussing my background. Delmarva is that little area of the country which consists of Delaware, the Eastern Shore of Maryland, and the Eastern Shore of Virginia, areas that appear on maps to be almost totally separated from mainland Virginia and Maryland by the mighty Chesapeake Bay.

Again, it is an honor to be here, because you must understand that I am what you would call an anomaly. I was not supposed to succeed in life because I was born to "dirt poor parents," one of which only had a fourth-grade education when he passed away in January of 2010. I was born into a totally segregated society in 1946 in northeastern North Carolina, where the black schools were separate and unequal; where colored and white water fountains and restrooms were separate, as well as Bibles that were sworn upon in court; if I ordered food from a restaurant or lunchroom counter, I could not sit or eat it there; or if I purchased an item of clothing I could not try it on in the store to determine if it fit properly. Those were some of the realities of life I was born into, but my parents had the foresight to want my four stairstep siblings and me to be better than they, so they sacrificed and encouraged us to obtain an education.

In the first grade, I walked about a mile to a small country school, regardless of the weather, because there were no school buses to transport us to the school. As we walked to school, white children rode the buses and often pelted us with water balloons and rocks, and

sometimes yelled racial slurs and obscenities at us. By the second grade, I was fortunate to attend a brand-new school about five miles from our home. That school was built solely for the purpose of preventing integration with white students. The school was built at that time because the legal process that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education, Topeka, Kansas* decision of May 17, 1954, in which the United States Supreme Court ruled that "to separate children solely on the basis of race was unconstitutional" had already begun its journey through the courts.

However, we had a new school, but it did not have an adequate supply of chemicals, Bunsen Burners, and other equipment for a chemistry lab; there were no new books—only the raggedy, discarded, cast-off, hand-me-down books that had often been retrieved from the dump from the white schools in the county. Yet, we had to pay rent on those books as if they were new. Those conditions persisted from the first to the twelfth grades. The only alternative was for my parents, other parents, and most teachers to host annual homecoming contests to raise funds for basketball, football, band uniforms, and equipment. They also raised money to purchase activity buses to transport the athletic teams and students to sports events and the few cultural events that were available to us. That was the nature of things at that time.

That did not mean that it was right or fair. However, there were other problems as well, such as classism among African Americans, including competition between those who lived in the country versus those who lived in town. My family lived in the country, but remember, that it was, and still is, all country in northeastern North Carolina. An example of classism is that I played basketball in junior high as well as in high school. In the eleventh grade, our team won the girls basketball championship, and I was voted the Most Valuable Player in the conference by the referees and all of the coaches, except my own coach. The night I received the MVP trophy, my coach asked for the trophy so that he could purportedly put it in the trophy case at

school, which was not the normal procedure. I soon learned that he wanted another player on our team to have the trophy. The other player was a tall, beautiful, model-like, light, bright, very fair player, who happened to have been my second cousin. The coach had no idea that we were cousins, simply because of our skin color, even though he was very good friends with my cousin's older siblings. Nor did he know that as second cousins our very own great, great grandfather was Caucasian. Apparently, the coach had erroneously related skin color to ability. The sad part of this particular scenario was that my basketball coach was also my mathematics teacher. He became angry with me because I did not give him my hard-won trophy, so he and several of my other teachers, his "buddies," took it upon themselves to change some of my grades on my report card and to make sure that I did not win any other awards.

Unfortunately, those scenarios continued into my twelfth grade. Even though I was the valedictorian of my class from the first grade to the twelfth, the teachers in my all-black high school refused to help me or advise me how to obtain a scholarship for college, primarily because we were so poor. Those teachers even had the audacity to tell me to my face, "Your mother was nothing, and your father was nothing, so we are not going to waste our time helping you obtain a scholarship." That was devastating, but it did not deter me or deviate from my goal. Perhaps I was naive, and that may have helped me to succeed because I did not immediately realize that there were such hurtful, mean-spirited people in the world.

I went to college in spite of them. I worked a number of little "pick-up" jobs and had a number of loans, as did my siblings. It was not easy, but I earned a degree in history, because I was determined to succeed in spite of the odds that were against me. In my first semester of college in the fall of 1964, a math professor required all females in his classes to visit his office. I did not visit his office for advice, consultation, or for whatever reason because I had an "A"

average in his class, so he gave me an "F" at the end of the semester. I knew what my average was in the class because the professor's graduate student who graded the exams was from my little hometown, and he always let me know what my grades were. It was unbeknownst to the professor that his graduate student and I knew each other. When I received my grade in the class, I protested the "F" all the way to the Office of the President of the university, but the math professor was the chairman of the department, so I had to retake all of the exams to prove that I knew what I was doing and eventually received my "A." I surmised that the professor was a dirty old man. It was difficult being black, female, and poor, even in a black institution; but it did not stop me from trying to do my best. My inspiration came from an unlikely source when I changed my major from chemistry to history at the beginning of my junior year of college, when I found my niche. I also had an excellent advisor who made me aware of Pi Gamma Mu.

Unfortunately, my saga did not end there because the struggle continued. I received my B.A. in History in January of 1969, and worked as an Assistant Teacher in the Migrant Program in my home county for six months and realized that was not my forte or my niche in life. I immediately enrolled in the Master's Program in History in August of 1969 and finished the degree within a year and a summer. I began teaching on the college level at the age of twenty-four in rural Tidewater Virginia. I taught there for two years, until at the end of the second year. I was told that it was my responsibility to train a young male teacher who was to be paid double my salary, even though he had not taught a day in his life. He had no experience. Further, my salary was not to be equal or greater than his because he had a family. I refused to train him because I perceived it as sexual inequality and when there was no opportunity to be justly compensated, I left the job on the last day of my contract and went to New York to find employment. As you can see, there are many forms of discrimination.

Once in New York, I taught Head Start in Harlem for a year, and made more money than teaching on the college level, while also obtaining a second master's degree in Liberal Arts Education, (the Great Books), at St. John's College, Santa Fe, New Mexico. After that year, I taught History, Geography and Criminal Justice at Lincoln University, Jefferson City, Missouri, from 1973-1977. While working at Lincoln University, I began working on my doctorate at the University of Missouri, in Columbia, Missouri, until I was hired to teach at Salisbury State College, now Salisbury University, in Salisbury, Maryland. While at Salisbury, I finished my doctorate at the University of Delaware.

My sojourn at the University of Delaware was not an easy task. The last Monday in January of 1984, was the first day that I set foot on the campus in Newark, Delaware. Just prior to the beginning of that first class, the professor walked into the class and made the announcement that he did not want me there. I had no idea who he was talking to, but as I looked around the room, I discovered that I was the only "honey-beige" person, or person of color in the room. When he repeated his announcement, I asked if he was referring to me. He stated, "Housewives become bored and have nothing else to do, so they take his class and never finish." My answer to him was that I was not a housewife and I was not bored, and since I had paid for the class, I was not leaving, so he just as well begin the class. Apparently, he thought that I could be intimidated and was going to leave. He had no idea that I had been teaching at the college level for thirteen years. I was insulted and outraged, but I was not going to give up. My reaction was the same as I had felt in my freshman year of college when the math professor wanted all females to visit his office. The next morning I was in the Office of the President of the University of Delaware and registered my complaint, which that office took seriously. Numerous road blocks were placed in my program to prevent me from graduating, but I

overcame every one of them, and when I marched for graduation, on January 5, 1991, there was no one from the University's History Department to hood me. After so much turmoil, strangely enough, it did not matter, because I had finished the program with more hours than anyone else. Months later, in early April of 1991, I received a letter from the department that informed me that I was eligible for graduation in May of 1991. I politely informed the department that I had already marched for graduation and that I had my diploma. In short, I had learned how to fight.

While completing my doctorate at the University of Delaware, I had continued to teach at Salisbury University, which lasted for thirty-six years. My teaching career spanned a total of forty-four years of college teaching but those forty-four years were not easy because I was subjected to theft, racism, discrimination, sexual harassment, stalking, and several other "isms." I was even approached by one of my colleagues in my department who had the audacity to enter my office and tell me to step back and not go up for promotion so that he could become a full professor.

His rationale was that he needed the money because his wife did not work. Unfortunately, the dean of the school at the time supported him and not me despite my numerous campus, community and state-wide activities, membership on governor-appointed commissions, publications, articles, and copious presentations, while he had scarcely any of those. Several times in my career I was told that I would not receive promotions unless I had liaisons with my supervisors. Those liaisons never occurred because I refused to belittle myself and stoop to that level. In one instance, I simply found another job and left the area. I did not become angry because usually anger does not resolve anything. Instead, I learned federal, state, and university rules and regulations and used those same rules to fight injustice and to succeed,

so that when I retired on May 30, 2013, I was an Emeritus Professor of History, as well as the recipient of numerous awards.

What helped me to get to this point in my life was my advisor in undergraduate and my first graduate school program, who happened to have been the same person. He was also the same person who encouraged me to join Pi Gamma Mu. That man was Dr. Earle E. Thorpe. When he initially advised me to join Pi Gamma Mu, I told him that I could not afford it because there were still two other siblings in college at the same time. Somehow, my parents found the money and I joined Pi Gamma Mu in May of 1968 at North Carolina College, now North Carolina Central University, in Durham. I took my membership in this august body to heart, and as a result, those seven ideals of Pi Gamma Mu have been my guiding principles in life since that day. Honor, integrity, morality, honesty, coupled with scholarship, social idealism, sociability, and all of the other principles have been extremely important in my life. It was Dr. Thorpe's belief that as social scientists we should pass the ideals of Pi Gamma Mu onto others and to practice those principles on a daily basis and, as a result, the world would be a better place. Those are ideals that I have tried to live by in order to honor my late parents, Dr. Thorpe, and myself.

It was also under Dr. Thorpe's tutelage that I learned the value of careful research because Dr. Thorpe was a stickler for detailed research. He was not only an excellent advisor and history professor, but he was also an author. He was my graduate advisor and chair of my first master's thesis, "The History of Washington County Union School," in Roper, North Carolina. It is the only record of the history of that school because it became a middle school and later an elementary school upon the integration of the schools. To date, my thesis is the only record of students who graduated from that school from 1952 to 1968. A few years after the thesis was

completed, for some strange reason, the Washington County Board of Education made the decision to burn the records of the students who had attended that school, which literally wiped out those students' high school records. Fortunately, my mother, who at the time was employed as a bookkeeper for the Board of Education, returned from lunch, saw the records being burned and confiscated the "S's" and some other records or they would have all been destroyed and lost forever. Therefore, I thank Dr. Thorpe for his foresight and for encouraging me to write about the history of my segregated high school, which saved its history. Because of the guidance of Dr. Thorpe, I learned to appreciate the value of local history and why it should be preserved. As a result, I have researched, written, and preserved my family's history, with nine generations on my mother's side and eight generations on my father's side. Since 1970, the family has held consecutive family reunions which have given me a sense of history and pride.

When I moved to Salisbury, Maryland in 1977, I realized that I was living in very close proximity to the home sites of Harriet Ross Tubman and Frederick Douglass. I quickly learned of other notables who lived there, worked there, or came there for one reason or the other. I was also made aware of the fact that many people, including many of whom were native to the area, did not know of the wealth of history that existed there. That fact was made very evident to me about twenty years ago when a student in one of my African American History classes on a Friday afternoon made the statement, "Blacks have never done anything in this country and definitely not on the Eastern Shore of Maryland." Startled, I asked him to repeat himself because I did not believe that he could have made such a statement. I was shocked, but I also had steam coming out of every part of my body. I dismissed the class early with the caveat that they be ready for anything I could possibly throw at them on Monday. I went home, typed all night and produced a thirty-two-page document that became my first book, titled, *Reality Check: African*

American Notables on Delmarva, which was placed in all of the schools within the tri-county area of Salisbury University. As a result of that incident, I began to research, to write about and to teach local African American history because of the wealth of history that existed there. Since that time, I have written two books, *Compass Points I and II*, about notable African Americans from the area and the third in the series is nearly complete and almost ready for the publisher. I have also published two other books, *Captain Kermit Travers: The Last Black Skipjack Captain*, and the *100th Anniversary Book of the American Legion Blake-Blackston Post #77*.

I also became aware of the absence of the history of African American soldiers whose presence in the Civil War had a profound impact upon the area, and with my co-authors, we have published two books about those United States Colored Troops (USCT), who fought for the Union. The third book about the soldiers should be completed within the next year and a half. The information that was found about those soldiers, free blacks and a majority who were slaves, included: the name, age, rank, regiment, company, height, complexion, color of hair, eye color, where they were born, if they were slaves or free, if married—the name of their wives or next of kin, and the names of their children, along with other data. That information was important because it helped many African Americans from counties on the Eastern Shore of Maryland to have the ability to connect with their ancestors, and it gave some of them a renewed sense of pride. It also helped to fill some gaps in their family histories. The books also afforded me the opportunity to go on numerous speaking engagements, book signings, and meet many descendants of the men, slave and free, who served in the Civil War.

Lastly, my journey and career choices are almost complete, and I have had few regrets. My only regret is that I may not have influenced as many students as I would have liked because of various reasons. Two reasons may have been because I was African American and female.

and most historians are not African American nor female, coupled with the erroneous belief by some students that they could not learn from an African American professor. Nonetheless, I wish that I could have influenced more individuals to have looked beyond those physical characteristics and, in turn, pursued their own dreams regardless of their finances, their sex, their sexual preference, their race, their color, their creed, their ethnicity or national origin. What was also disappointing to me was that at one institution, I was the only African American in the department for thirty-six years. For the first ten or fifteen years in that department, whenever an African American student disagreed with or had a conflict with another professor, the students were often asked to meet with me. I even had some students transferred into my class in spite of the fact that the class limit had already been exceeded. However, if there was a disagreement between a student and me who happened not to be African American, there was no one for me to send them to; I dealt with the problem myself. In short, there was no reciprocity, as we each should have dealt with the students as students, regardless of race, etc.

My life has been governed by me honoring my ancestors as their blood and hopes and dreams reside in me. Their desire for me to succeed and to be better than they, will not be forgotten, due to their sacrifices. I also understood what honor and respect meant because of some professors who took the time and effort to properly advise, to encourage and guide a poor, hungry for knowledge, young lady, to see and understand the big picture in life, and instructed me to pay it forward. I also had to promise my parents and Dr. Thorpe that I would try to instill that same respect and honor in my students and with those I interact. Any success that I have achieved is a direct result of my ancestors who taught me about my heritage, which inspired me to study the social sciences and to preserve history. Any success I have achieved, and that does not mean material or financial wealth, and nor does that mean that I am a world-renowned

historian, because I am not, simply means that I have found my niche and I am surely happy with what I do and have done. Success is defined in many ways, and each of you must determine what success means for you.

Therefore, my advice to each of you is to follow your heart because each of you **MUST** find the discipline and vocation that makes you happy. Find your passion and follow it or you will be a miserable human being. You will go to work every day making everyone around you miserable, because you are miserable and you will be less efficient and/or effective. Find your passion and as a social scientist, follow the seven ideals of Pi Gamma Mu, and I guarantee that you will not only be a credit to yourself but a credit to your family, your friends, your colleagues, your community, and your nation.

To your own self be true. Honor yourself and know your value and do not allow anyone to devalue you or your hard work. Remember that you must work hard for what you want out of life, or you will not appreciate the final grade, result, or reward. Please understand that there will always be naysayers and those who will try to minimize your work or contributions, but those negative persons cannot and will not always keep your knowledge or talents hidden, because the cream always rises to the top. You may become disappointed or angry with them, but remember that anger does not usually produce the desired result. Most of all, remember, that the greatest revenge is success, and your success is and should be measured by you and your ability to achieve your goals. Always know who you are and to respect and honor yourself or someone else will define who you are in their terms, which may not necessarily be how you want to be defined or remembered. If you are to succeed in this cyber-paced, dog-eat-dog global society in which you are living, you must learn to honor and respect yourself first and those who have sacrificed to help you reach this point in your lives. You are not an island unto

yourself, because you are standing on the shoulders of those who came before you and are encouraging you to excel. That in itself is reason for them to be respected and honored by you, but you cannot honor and respect them until you learn to honor and respect yourself. As social scientists, you have an awesome job before you. In the past, honor and respect have made a difference in the world, but recently, honor and respect have taken a back seat to bullying, disrespect, negativity and divisiveness. It will be up to you as knowledgeable, future leaders of the world to restore those time-worn values if you want to ever possibly live in relative peace. Our future lies with you.

All of us need inspiration at some point in our lives, and I am no exception to the rule. There is a poem about honor and respect that has encouraged me over the years, and I hope that it may inspire and encourage you as well. The poem states it much more eloquently than I. The following poem, *Invictus*, which was penned by William Ernest Hemley in 1875, is the same poem that inspired the late Nelson Mandela to persevere twenty-seven years of imprisonment because he fought apartheid in South Africa.

INVICTUS

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole.
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winched nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade.
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find, me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll.
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.

There are also other poems that have inspired me over the years and may also inspire you, such as, “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou, Dreams by Langston Hughes, and “If by” Rudyard Kipling.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to speak at this banquet. Please, go forth and make a positive impact upon the world, and be the leaders you are destined to be. As social scientists and knowledgeable scholars, along with the technology you have within your grasp, there is nothing to stop you from achieving your dreams and becoming successful individuals, and leaders of the world. Good luck to each of you.

Thank you,

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