

The Lincoln Academy of Illinois

Chancellor's Edited Remarks Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall

“Legacies are complex narratives; they live long after the life of the author and they leave ‘unfinished business’..... Our dynamics are different, but the struggles of Mr. Lincoln’s time – the struggles for human dignity, inclusion and equality and justice FOR ALL are also present now. Rather than view them as burdens, I ask you to embrace them as possibilities and timeless invitations, and to ask yourself what it means that your name is now forever connected to the name, integrity and legacy of Abraham Lincoln”.

The 44th Annual Student Laureate Convocation Hall of Representatives – Old State Capitol November 17, 2018

Good morning everyone – students, families, Academy members, and distinguished guests, and welcome to the 44th Student Laureate convocation of the Lincoln Academy of Illinois.

I am Stephanie Pace Marshall, Chancellor of the Academy, and President Emerita of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, and it is my privilege to welcome you to the Old State Capitol, one of the most historic buildings in Illinois, to add the names of 57 remarkable young men and women to our distinguished roster of Students Laureates.

160 years ago, Abraham Lincoln stood in this very room to accept his party's nomination for the U.S. Senate; it was after his acceptance that he delivered what has come to be called his 'House Divided' speech. It was a fractured and a fragile time in our nation's history; many would argue that we are in such a time once again. Our path forward as a nation is also far from clear, and our national discourse often feels like a 'house divided'.

If we denied the presence of division and discord, we would not be paying attention to this moment. But if we ignored the historic high moral ground, values, decency and goodness of our nation and our fellow citizens, we would be perpetuating a story that is not fundamentally who we are. Together we must continue to live a narrative of possibility and promise; that is what our 16th president would now call us to do.

On December 3, 2018, Illinois will celebrate our 200th Anniversary and so you are our Bicentennial Class. As of today, your name is inextricably connected to the name and legacy of Abraham Lincoln. Embrace this legacy and carry his name and reputation, with honor.

Lincoln lived our founding values and commitments: justice, freedom, liberty, and equal opportunity for all – regardless of economic status, race, or religion.

It is now OUR 'unfinished work' to ensure these values are preserved and expanded. So, it is imperative that we not get distracted, remain vigilant, and focus on what really matters. There is plenty for each of us to do.....

The Lincoln Academy was created in 1964 by Illinois governor Otto Kerner to honor the state's most celebrated citizens – those whose

exemplary achievements enhanced our lives and contributed to the “betterment of humanity” in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln.

To fulfill this mission, the Academy bestows the Order of Lincoln - our State’s highest honor - at a Convocation held each spring in cities across Illinois. On May 18, 2019, the Convocation and Investiture of Lincoln Laureates will be held in Springfield.

Recipients, which now number over 340, have included:

Public servants -President Ronald Regan and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton

Journalists—Mike Royo, Scott Simon, and Bill Kurtis

Scientists —Leon Lederman and Walter Massey

Performers—Charlton Heston, Mahalia Jackson, and Ramsey Lewis

Internationally renowned performing organizations -The Joffrey Ballet and The Chicago Symphony Orchestra

And sports icons - Ernie banks, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, and Coach K

We view these distinguished Laureates as our great citizens OF today, and we view you as our great citizens FOR tomorrow.

You are all high academic achievers and we celebrate your success. But I trust you know that academic achievement alone is not sufficient for wisely shaping our world.

As Julie and I read your essays, we were filled with gratitude to see the legacies of leadership and service you are already weaving.

In her book REASON FOR HOPE, renowned primatologist Jane Goodall said:

“I DO have hope for the future. My reasons for hope are four-fold:

1. The human brain,
2. The resilience of nature.
3. The energy and enthusiasm that are found or can be kindled among young people worldwide; and
4. The indomitable human spirit”

“Living in the Spirit of Abraham Lincoln” can often seem illusive, but your actions are bringing it to life. Your unapologetic commitments and intense passion to serve others have already made a difference on your campuses and in your communities, and beyond.

You Are changing lives; and you are ARE giving us hope. And for that, we are most grateful, especially since you are just getting started!

In a moment you will each be called to the well of this chamber and here – on the same ground where Mr. Lincoln once stood – you will receive the Lincoln Medal and a formal citation signed by the Governor bearing the Great Seal of Illinois and declaring you to be a Student Laureate of The Lincoln Academy.

Mr. Lincoln assumed his presidency with an almost impossible mission: to save the union. He accomplished this through uncommon leadership that challenged conventional wisdom and he did so with a clear and grounded moral compass.

It was the integrity of his character, conviction, intensity of his commitment, and authentic inclusiveness of his communication and behavior that set him apart.

He understood the human struggle; he invited rivals onto his team. He saved the union and formally ended slavery.

Those defining elements of his presidential legacy are studied by scholars and often viewed in awe by people around the world.

But here's what I'd like you to remember—

Legacies are complex narratives and they live long after the life of the author. They leave unfinished business—and they present invitations and opportunities for the future.

“There is a gravitational pull to a legacy”, author and New York Times writer, David Brooks, said. “It is not a moral heirloom – cherished but disposable; revered but irrelevant. A legacy is a timeless obligation”.

Our dynamics are different now, but the struggles of Mr. Lincoln's time—the struggles for human dignity, inclusion, and equality and justice FOR ALL are also present now.

Rather than viewing them as burdens, I encourage you to embrace them as possibilities and invitations and ask yourself what it means, that your name is now forever connected to the name and legacy of Abraham Lincoln.

Almost exactly 100 years after the Civil War the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King said “the ark of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice”.

Nearly 50 years later, at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC, President Obama said “the ark of the moral universe may bend toward justice, but it doesn’t bend on its own”.

So, do not wait for others to step forward.

CHOOSE to use YOUR talents, YOUR passion, and YOUR voice to bend this arc in ways that only YOU can and, like Lincoln, earn the moral authority to lead.

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CHOOSE to use YOUR talents, YOUR passion, and YOUR voice to bend this arc in ways that only YOU can and, like Lincoln, earn the moral authority to lead.

Arc bending is not easy, so carry Mr. Lincoln’s integrity and moral compass with you, into our contemporary struggles.

Fortunately, you are not alone on this journey.

Look around you —turn to your left and your right— and see your fellow travelers. You now share a common legacy and a common identity – you are now Student Laureates of The Lincoln Academy of Illinois.

What you don’t see, however, are the over 2,000 Student Laureates selected since 1975 who came before you, and all of whom share your commitment to serve, in the spirit of Abraham Lincoln.

They may not all be in Illinois, but they are someplace and, like you, they are seeking to make a difference in the world.

You can learn from one another; lean on one another, challenge and support one another, and walk courageously together

But here's the catch - FIRST you need to FIND one another; and then connect and collaborate if there is work for you to do together.

We think there is, but that is up to you.

In this Illinois Bicentennial year, the Lincoln Academy now wants to walk with you and support you in:

- Building your leadership competencies and confidence;
- Expanding your networks and connections; and
- Amplifying your voice and impact in the world.

Imagine what might be possible if we could enable you to connect not only to your fellow Student Laureates, but Academy Laureates, Rectors, and Members, so you could learn and work together.

“Bending that arc” might go a little bit faster!

As a demonstration of our desire to engage with you, the Laureates of 2018 have each written a letter to you which is in your program book.

It has never been done before and it is their gift to you; this will now become an annual tradition.

Called Legacy Voices: Letters to the Next Generation, Laureates offer their most powerful lessons on leadership and life.

This is the conversation we wish to begin with you this afternoon.

This is my last Student Laureate convocation as Chancellor of the Lincoln Academy. I will step down following our Laureate convocation in May.

It has been my honor to serve as Chancellor and I look forward to continuing my work with you in the years ahead.