

Keynote Address by Barbara Atkinson
Fifth Annual University of Kansas Women's Hall of Fame Dinner
Co-Sponsors: Commission on the Status of Women, a student organization
and the Emily Taylor Women's Resource Center
Malott Room, Kansas Union
Tuesday, April 17th, 2007

Thank you for that very kind introduction.

It's good to see so many of your special friends and family here tonight. I thought there was a good chance you would all be home working to finish your income tax returns. But, I should have known that this group would be here. Clearly you wouldn't have accomplished all that you have, if you were procrastinators.

While I am very honored to be your keynote speaker tonight, I understand I wasn't your first choice. Nonetheless, I am glad Don Imus suddenly had a conflict that prevents him from being here tonight.

I truly do feel honored to be in the company of so many accomplished leaders. I'm particularly impressed by the student leaders represented among the awardees this evening. Your passion, enthusiasm, commitment, and heart demonstrate to me that this next generation of women leaders are well equipped, to change the world for the better.

I also want you to know how deeply touched I am to be among this year's inductees into the KU Women's Hall of Fame. As a proud Kansan and a proud Jayhawk, it means the world to me that my name will be among the list of distinguished women previously inducted. I am only hopeful that after my induction others will still want to be nominated for the honor!

Like many of the women in this room tonight, our mothers and grandmothers and those before them have never been shy about venturing into the frontier. My family is like that. My one grandmother's family settled in South Dakota. When she got married, she and my grandfather moved to North Dakota in the early 1900's a pretty rugged place back then. On the other side my grandmother came from Italy by herself as a teenager in 1917, and moved to

Northern Minnesota. You have to respect this urge to make a better place for future generations by the strong women of the past.

In Kansas, women have been spectacular in their accomplishments. Amelia Earhart gained prominence in 1928 as the first woman to cross the Atlantic Ocean by plane. Olive Ann Beech of Wichita was the “First Lady of Aviation” devoting her career to building Beech Aircraft from ten employees to ten thousand. Susan B. Anthony, who spent time in Kansas campaigning for women to secure the right to vote, declared in 1867, “Any man who voted against female suffrage was a blockhead.” Georgia Neese Gray of Richland was appointed by President Truman to become the first Treasurer of the United States. Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker was the first woman elected to the United States Senate in her own right. Lynette Woodard became the first female basketball player to play as a Harlem Globetrotter. Susanna Madora Salter, just weeks after women were given the vote and at the age of 27, was elected the first woman mayor in America when two-thirds of the votes cast in the April 1887 election in Argonia went to her. Of course there’s also Laura Ingalls Wilder, who lived in Kansas from 1869-1871, and inspired generations of young people with her stories of a life lived in the Little House on the Prairie. And let’s not forget our current governor, the first woman to be re-elected Governor of Kansas and the first daughter of a Governor to serve as a Governor, Kathleen Sebelius is a nationally regarded public servant whose leadership benefits us all.

These remarkable pioneers, like so many of the women in this room tonight, stand as vivid reminders of the significant contributions the women of Kansas have made and what women can accomplish when we keep our eyes on the horizon and pursue big dreams.

These visionary Kansas women never saw the frontier as a barrier—they always preferred to see it as a challenge. If a barrier was put in their way—they did not see it as a boundary to be accepted, but rather, as an obstacle to be overcome. With resiliency, persistence, ingenuity and integrity they marshaled their considerable strengths and overcame great odds. We all are the beneficiaries of their legacy of strength and perseverance and tonight, those who are recognized here carry on in their stead. As we recognize a new generation of women leaders we are always wise to acknowledge those who blazed the trail before us and to accept our obligation to act as sentries for those yet to come.

While we would like to think we live in an enlightened age in which the equality of women is universally accepted and in a progressive time in which the value and worth of women is widely recognized—it is clear that many challenges (and opportunities) remain. Tonight as I think of the challenges women face, I want to make just three observations for you to consider.

- We are only as strong as the weakest among us.**
- We have exciting new frontiers yet to be explored.**
- The buddy system works wonders.**

Let me turn to the first of these. We must remember that our own status can only be revealed in the status of the most vulnerable women among us.

Whenever one woman is victimized by domestic violence or abuse, we are all bruised.

Whenever one woman is denied a good education and the opportunities that follow, we are all made ignorant.

Whenever one woman is denied the dignity of work, a career, a promotion or fair pay because of her gender, we are all impoverished.

Whenever one of our daughters' believes that she cannot dream big dreams and through work and dedication become whatever she wants to become, we are all denied hope.

Whenever one woman is denied quality health care, we are all made infirm.

Whenever one woman is denied access to knowledge about their bodies through comprehensive sex education we are all at risk.

Whenever one girl is consumed by the pursuit of a body image that is unhealthy and unattainable, we are all diminished.

And, when all women speak up for that one woman, we are all empowered.

There are clearly some in our culture that accept the degradation of women. Whether it is in popular films, the words of shock jocks or in the lyrics of platinum selling rap songs—we are up against a wave of hate and sexism which left unchecked will create new and troubling realities for the women wrongly defined by it. It is up to us to right this wrong in the marketplace of ideas. We cannot afford to be complacent.

Even as we pause to celebrate the accomplishments of the women represented here, let us not forget the many millions of women around the world tonight who are fighting to feed their children, working to pay their bills, struggling to leave an abusive relationship, studying to better themselves and sacrificing to care for others in need. These unsung heroes are the women we must all seek to elevate by our work. For all you do to give these women a voice I commend you.

Second, new frontiers remain to be explored and I invite you to join the journey.

As a scientist and an educator I am profoundly aware of the new frontiers in the world of science and medicine.

In a remarkably short period of time we have discovered the existence of cells, learned the importance of DNA and mapped the human genome. Our knowledge of human health has grown at an exponential rate in the last decade—and yet much more remains a mystery.

As the first woman to hold the titles of Dean of the KU School of Medicine and Executive Vice Chancellor of the University of Kansas Medical Center, I consider it a great pleasure to guide the work of our state's only academic medical center.

The future prosperity of our state in the new knowledge-based global economy will be rooted in our ability to inspire and grow ingenuity, creativity and innovation. The life sciences, in my opinion, offers us the best place to focus our early investments.

Our region is now looking to the University of Kansas to lead this effort and to the KU School of Medicine and the KU Medical Center to guide the way.

I am excited to have the opportunity to articulate a bold, ten-year vision to grow the life sciences in our region. We have already accomplished a great deal. Since I became Dean we have had great success in recruiting new faculty members—over 150 scientists, educators and clinicians have been recruited into new positions and we have grown our clinical enterprise dramatically at the same time. We have been supported by the state legislature whose leadership has resulted in new facilities and new investments in our university’s number one priority—the creation of a world class cancer center for the citizens of Kansas and this region. We have grown our external funding—including a 22% increase in our National Institutes of Health funding in the last year alone. We have retooled our curriculum to provide an innovative, team-oriented, technology-rich, student-centered environment designed to truly prepare the next generation of physicians to effectively address the needs of their patients.

To achieve our vision we will aggressively grow existing programs whose excellence has been widely recognized and we will expand emerging programs that have shown great promise and potential. We will recruit the best and brightest minds to Kansas and direct their talents toward expanding our understanding of human health. We will expand our commitment to clinical and translational research by making sure patients here have access to leading edge treatments and cures.

This vision can only be accomplished with new partnerships. It is one reason we are reaching out to well-respected partners, like Saint Luke’s and Children’s Mercy Hospitals, to benefit from their investment and collaboration. Some have questioned the wisdom of this path—believing instead that the status quo is acceptable. Those who fail to appreciate the promise of this vision would relegate us to second class status for generations to come. I instead believe we should boldly embrace the opportunities of this new frontier. I prefer to see things as they can be—instead of seeing them as they are. And that is the vision needed of anyone venturing into a new frontier.

We live at an unprecedented time of opportunity and an unprecedented time of convergence around a shared vision—a vision that has the power to transform our economy, enhance human health and provide

more doctors for our state and region. I am excited about the possibilities. I am even more certain of the consequences of not pursuing our course—devastating consequences that I will work hard to prevent.

I hope that you will consider the unique and valuable role our medical center plays in shaping the future of Kansas and our region. We need your passionate and informed advocacy with our elected officials, with those in the media and with other community leaders. With your help I know we can accomplish great things. I invite you to enlist with me in this cause and together work to build a brighter future for us and for those who come after us.

Third, we know the buddy system works.

Some problems seem intractable—simply too large to solve through the work of even the most remarkable among us. Yet, I would argue that we should never accept that a problem can't be addressed simply because it seems too big.

We only need acknowledge that one woman acting with passion, commitment and discipline can and will make a difference—and when that woman acts in concert with others the difference they can make multiplies.

Instead of trying to come up with the big solution—I would hope each of us would commit to be part of the solution.

Most importantly is the role we can each play in mentoring another woman or girl. By sharing our presence, by offering our advice and by opening ourselves to learn from those we mentor, we can forever change the trajectory of a life.

As a young mother who wanted to go to graduate school, I met with the Chair of Pathology (at an unnamed medical school) for advice. His advice was that I should give up my studies and stay home to raise my children. You can all imagine how pleased I was to run into him again about 15 years later as I was about to deliver the remarks I had prepared for one of the most prestigious lecture series in the field of pathology. I can only imagine the good he might have done by

empowering and encouraging female students at that time—rather than demeaning and judging them. I only wish he could be here tonight. My children and husband are here tonight and I think they would say they each are better because of what I've done.

In science, math and engineering fields the proportion of female students has grown steadily but further encouragement and coaching is needed if young girls are to aspire to pursue these careers. Those of us who have worked in these fields are uniquely positioned to provide that encouragement through our example. Every girl deserves to feel empowered to dream big and to have in her life another caring adult capable of helping her find the opportunities necessary to allow those dreams to find root and grow.

So, I would admonish all of us to find a buddy—to reach out as a mentor to another woman. As educators we know that the mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled. When we nurture that flame we provide the source of illumination for many bright tomorrows.

In navigating our journey with a buddy, let us follow the words of Cadet Maxim and, “risk more than others think is safe, care more than others think is wise, dream more than others think is practical, and expect more than others think is possible.”

Knowing you, and what you all have accomplished—I have to believe that in your hands, nothing is impossible.

Thank you for letting me share this special occasion with all of you.