

**“Give Up or Get Up?”
By Nancy J Kelley**

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Thank you all! I am so happy to be here to celebrate this important moment and achievement in the lives of the 2015 Education Fund Fellows. This is a joyous occasion and I am privileged to share it with you.

I feel like I know each of you, from reading your stories. I am so amazed that you come from all over the world... the United States, Africa, Germany, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, China, Israel, Peru and Russia.

You don’t know me, but I want you all to know, that we have something fundamental in common.

At some point, during tumultuous circumstances in our lives, we all found ourselves alone and flat on the mat with one simple choice ... Do I give up or get up?

And we all chose to GET UP!!! That is why we are here tonight. To celebrate that choice and the belief in yourself that gave you the courage to do that. CONGRATULATIONS!!!

I am a Harvard educated lawyer and executive who has worked in the White House, built businesses and scientific institutions and traveled all over the world. I was an uneducated teenage mother from a Catholic working class family with few prospects. How I got from there to here is my story.

Yet there are common elements shared in all of our stories... that seem to create a universal story shared by many women everywhere.

Tough beginnings. Lack of early confidence, guidance, encouragement and support. Missed chances. Early marriages and troubled relationships. Children born at too young an age and too soon. Serious illness, either personally or in the family. Loss. Failure. Financial hardship.

And then one day something changed for all of us. Some small voice inside of each one of us began to speak. And that voice said, “This is not how my story is going to end. I am GETTING UP!

And gradually, whether it was finding our inner strength and courage, the opportunity provided by a community college, someone offering a helping hand like the Women's Forum, unexpected events that gave a new perspective or path to explore, we found the way to reimagine a better future for ourselves and our families and to create a different story.

A story of courage, strength, resilience, hope, love and self esteem. A story that inspires and encourages those around us... our families, friends and colleagues. A story that allows us to dwell in new possibilities.

So tonight, I don't want to dwell on the past, but to reflect on the new possibilities that open to you as a result of receiving this award and pursuing your education. I hope that what I have to share might help you in the months and years ahead.

In the spring of 1974, when I was eighteen, I left the five room house where I grew up with my older brother and three sisters. I kissed my mother goodbye, got on my bicycle and rode off down the street into the future.

I had graduated from high school the previous year and had attended a local community college for one semester before dropping out. Even though I had graduated in the top 10% of my high school class at a parochial high school, no one told me I might go to college. Now, I had rented a newly built apartment in a two family house with high school friends. I had a job as a claims clerk at the Travelers Insurance Company. I had a boy friend named Scott. I had vague plans to apply to the Fashion Institute of Technology to study design some day. Other than that, I didn't have much. I had no money, no car, no education, no idea of how the world worked or how much could go wrong.

Needless to say, that choice didn't work out so well. By the time I was twenty, I was married and had three children born thirteen months apart, including twins that were premature and as a result faced tremendous health challenges.

We were broke. The only thing that kept us from qualifying for welfare was the book value of a '69 blue chevy, which made us too "rich" to receive benefits. Consequently, my husband and I worked four jobs, without a lot of prospects for either ourselves or our children.

When I entered Manchester Community College in 1980, I knew that I had to make a different choice and build a better future for myself and my family, which would also influence the world in a positive manner.

I wasn't exactly sure how that was going to happen.

But I had dreams – the first place we dwell when imagining new possibilities. So I went to MCC, which was right around the corner from my house. I could drop off my children at school before classes and pick them up on my way home. I could take out

a student loan to pay the tuition. And I could begin to explore the possibilities of a life that was different from my past.

I thought I would major in accounting and someday, if it worked, I would go UCONN and become a tax lawyer. But something magical happened along the way.

At MCC, supported and encouraged by talented faculty and staff, I discovered worlds of knowledge that I had previously been unaware of. It ignited a thirst to know more than my basic studies in accounting offered.

I also met a community of people intensely interested in helping others to reimagine their futures. As a result of their encouragement, I ran for Treasurer of the Student Senate, organized a lobbying trip to Washington, coordinated a Political Awareness Day at which hundreds of people registered to vote and served as a Legislative Intern in the State Legislature under the guidance of people who would become my lifelong mentors and friends.

When the Dean of Student Affairs suggested that I could go to Washington, I never dreamed that in just six years, I would be working in the White House, during the final term of a President whose financial aid policies I had opposed.

As that incident suggested, times and opportunities change.

As my future unfolded, in addition to my role as a wife and mother of three young children, I became...

Valedictorian of MCC.

Truman Scholar.

Graduate of Yale College.

Graduate of Harvard Law School and Harvard Kennedy School.

White House Fellow and Special Assistant to the United States Trade Representative Lawyer. Executive. Real Estate Developer. Entrepreneur.

World traveller.

Architect of Scientific and Healthcare Institutions.

I am now also a mother of three grown daughters - a cinematographer, a surgeon and an executive in international technology development - whose lives would have been very different without the possibilities provided to me by the Community College, the financial support I received through the Truman Scholarship and others, and the people who helped me along the way.

I am a grandmother of four grandchildren, all of whom are citizens of the world with dual citizenship, and two of whom speak three languages.

So how did all of this happen?

As most of you know, dreaming was only the first (and easiest) step.

After MCC, my life became a never-ending series of adventures and challenges. With each new step, came new possibilities to influence the world in a larger manner, opportunities to aim a little higher, and with that, risks to evaluate, choices to make... changes to incorporate.

There were tough points along the way. Betrayal by people I trusted, the loss of people I loved, financial setbacks, serious illness in my family.

Times filled with fear, loneliness, grief ... and unspeakable challenges.

I came to understand that dwelling in new possibilities was not just about dreams, but an ongoing process of understanding my priorities in the face of opportunities and challenges.

- It was paying attention to my own intuition,
- Making **conscious** choices about where I could make a difference,
- Showing up determined to do my best every day,
- Facing every problem head on, and
- Persevering through whatever difficulty...
- Knowing that I could not dictate the outcome, and surrendering to a higher calling.

I wasn't always graceful in the midst of learning all of this, and I had to forgive myself often.

But as I continued to get up and try, a funny thing happened. An entire world opened up filled with unexpected possibilities and people who believed in me. With each new step forward, I found myself entering a new world that I could not possibly imagine... blessed with the lessons from all of the experiences I had had, and infused with new blessings already on their way.

You see, the hardship, loss and struggles don't stop. But in the moments when you no longer believe in yourself, there are other people and a greater power who still believe, who know your purpose and the possibilities... who whisper to you ... this is not the way your story will end.

You have been given a tremendous gift... the gift of belief in the midst of struggle. This scholarship is a gift of belief from others... in you and in new possibilities for your lives and the lives of your families.

I know you will use it well.