

University of Notre Dame Valedictorian Katie Washington: A terrific role model

Written by Marian Wright Edelman
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As colleges and universities across the country celebrated their students' accomplishments this commencement season, the news about the top student at the University of Notre Dame was especially inspiring for me. Twenty-one-year-old Katie Washington from Gary, IN, made history as Notre Dame's first Black valedictorian. Katie was a biological sciences major with a minor in Catholic social teaching who earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average. She is planning to pursue a joint M.D./Ph.D. next at Johns Hopkins University, and she said she was "humbled" and "in a mode of gratitude and thanksgiving" by being named valedictorian. In a culture filled with superficial celebrities, beautiful, brilliant, hardworking young women and men like Katie are real role models and ought to be on the cover of our magazines. They're who our children should aspire to be.

Katie's work ethic and passion for medicine were instilled in her by caring parents. Her father is a doctor and her mother is a nurse, and an older brother and sister have chosen medical careers, too. In interviews Katie remembered going to her father's office after school, where she would sit and do her homework and later had the chance to accompany him as he visited patients. She also thanked teachers and other adult mentors who encouraged her over the years, saying, "I have had so much support, people who really wanted to see that I reached my full potential. They all had my best interest at heart." Meanwhile, her proud parents and teachers remembered how disciplined she was and how hard she always worked.

As an undergraduate, Katie conducted research on lung cancer and spent a year and a half studying the mosquito that carries dengue and yellow fever. She did some of her research in partnership with Notre Dame's Haiti program and helped show how human habits in Haiti contribute to infectious mosquitoes' spread. Her studies outside the lab included serving as student coordinator of the Center for Social Concerns' "Lives in the Balance: Youth Violence and Society" seminar. In her graduation speech she spoke of the shock that occurred when she visited a juvenile re-entry program as part of that seminar and met an old childhood friend who was trying to turn his life around after being involved in the juvenile justice system. Although they had grown up in the same neighborhood, she was moved by how differently their lives had turned out so far.

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Katie also served as a student director of the school's gospel choir and a mentor and tutor for girls at a local high school where she was able to give back some of the support and encouragement she had received. In her graduation speech Katie also spoke to fellow students about the importance of being able to move on "after the applause stops"—and of being self-motivated to keep moving forward to use their gifts and serve others. She is already living out this lesson with her own life. Too often, we read headlines about young people only when they have gotten into trouble. But we all need to seek out and hold up young people like Katie who are working hard, doing the right thing, and excelling. Just as Katie was mentored by adults in her home, school, church, and community, we can all do our part to encourage young people in our circles. Who knows when we will be mentoring the next brilliant scientist or college valedictorian? And who knows how far Katie will go now and what medical breakthroughs or cures she will work on over her lifetime? Congratulations, Katie Washington! We are so proud of you.

Marian Wright Edelman is President of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org.