



114th Commencement Speech, 2023

***THE WORLD DESPERATELY NEEDS
A SWEET BRIAR WOMAN***

by

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Sweet Briar College Class of 1987**



HOLLA, HOLLA, HOLLA! CONGRATULATIONS VIXENS Sweet Briar College Class of 2023! This moment is huge, monumental in fact. We all join with you today to celebrate this significant accomplishment. Know that Sweet Briar alumnae held the vision of you being here today before you could even envision this day for yourselves. Your fellow VIXEN sisters who have gone before you fought to ensure that this special place known as Sweet Briar College would be here for you to experience an unmatched educational oasis. Here Women Lead. Relish in this moment as you reflect on the last four years of your educational journey. Appreciate this moment as you reflect on every tradition from the Freshman Hitching Post, Big Sister/Little Sister moments to Lantern Bearing to Scream nights, and every club in which you participated. My fondest memories were being a member of Aint's and Asses and serving as a Resident Advisor on what was formerly known as the V-Vault, the 3rd floor of Reid dormitory, which had the most restrictive male visitation hours on campus. But after we smile and reflect for a moment on the joys of campus life...I need you to be keenly aware...

The world desperately needs a Sweet Briar Woman.

You have been educated and grounded at an institution that allowed you to explore who you are- your values, strengths, and your visions for your future. That is a gift, an incredible starting point as you begin your life's journey. Sweet Briar is a special place that does multiple things well. This historic educational institution provides a superb education, a platform for women to LEAN into leading, an environment that allows women to excel and break glass ceilings, while creating an environment, a cocoon if you will, that is conducive to personal growth. I know this because Sweet Briar provided each of those attributes for me. Each of these empowers you as Sweet Briar graduates to be what this world desperately needs- women who are poised and prepared for leadership. Not simply to lead but to help transform our world. Our nation is awaiting your arrival. We don't have time to wait. Since Sweet Briar has provided every tool you need for success let me spend a few minutes revealing why the world DESPERATELY needs a Sweet Briar Woman.

It is no secret that our country and our world are at a pivotal moment in many ways. In my lifetime I have never seen the division that we now face. We seem to have forgotten that we all share a common humanity. **And while we are not all equally guilty, we are all equally responsible for building a decent and just America.** As Sweet Briar women, each of you graduating today is uniquely qualified to do just that because in addition to expanding your minds, you have been made keenly aware of your responsibility to each other and to mankind at large. So knowing how desperately our world needs you and your gifts let me remind you of three thoughts that you must carry with you as you prepare to accept your degree and move into the world.

First, remember you have obtained all the tools you need to move boldly in

the direction of your dreams and aspirations - GO, DO, and BE. As a graduate of a women's college, you are poised to become what this country needs: civic-minded leaders in an array of professions, seeking to ensure the prosperity of generations to come. This is statistically proven. It was just reported in March 2023 that while only 2% of American female college graduates attended women's colleges, graduates of women's colleges comprise more than 20% of women in Congress. Graduates of women's colleges represent 33% of women on Fortune 1000. U.S. News reported that colleges that educate women provide opportunities that ensure that women graduate with STEM degrees two times more than the national average. Moreover, women college graduates are more likely to attend as well as complete a graduate or professional degree. Simply put graduates of women's colleges have high expectations of themselves. As a Sweet Briar graduate you have a strong sense of self and confidence in your own abilities. Perhaps your trajectory as a graduate of Sweet Briar is so incredibly bright because having personally developed at an institution for women, by women, with women intentionally in mind you have an unflinching conviction that there is literally nothing you can't do. And as a Sweet Briar VIXEN, I am here to tell you that is the ABSOLUTE TRUTH!

You are **the most** prepared for a world that desperately needs you, a world that is ever-changing- demographically and socially. Your graduating class reflects diversity including women from twenty-six different states and six different countries, studying everything from biology, business, English, environmental science, psychology, and engineering. You even have women who have obtained a Certificate in Sustainable Agriculture and Food Systems. Sweet Briar was committed to principles such as diversity, inclusion, and justice long before they became vogue. As a result, you are positioned to navigate any arena you find yourself and

you will find doing so much easier and natural than others who were not fortunate to be enlightened by their educational institution. You ALL are phenomenal. Your education at this institution for women puts you ahead of the times. You have witnessed women leading every day for four years- from your professors to President Woo, you have witnessed powerful women leading. The world desperately needs you, this world is ready for YOU, step into your rightful place and understand that ANY place you choose to step into is, in fact, YOUR rightful place.

Second, if opportunity doesn't knock build a door.

As you begin your life beyond the confines of this beautiful landscape known as Sweet Briar, you will have many experiences- whether in your graduate or professional studies or as you embark upon your career. I will be honest despite all you have accomplished, you will encounter those who will test your skills and even question your educational prowess. You must remember at these times to maintain the confidence that you gained by leading right here at Sweet Briar and seeing other women leaders. Your liberal arts education has given you the skills necessary to forge uncharted paths. Never allow anyone to make you doubt that.

Seek out opportunities and experiences that will allow you to continue growing- personally and professionally. But always remember no one's career is without barriers and naysayers. This is particularly true for women as we enter spaces, places, and fields that were not designed with us in mind. As Sweet Briar women we have no time to play small. **There is no passion to be found in playing small and settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living. By playing it small you only leave room for fear.** Women who lead cannot afford to play small.

You know your power. You should feel confident that you are well suited and

able to maximize this power in pursuing your passion in whatever career or discipline you choose. You have seen and experienced your power during your time here. As you follow your passion seek every opportunity to expand and grow in your respective fields and **when the table has not been set with you in mind make a door and enter the room anyway and as Shirley Chisolm reminded us, bring your own chair to the table. Don't wait to be invited. Whatever you do be committed to making an impact not just taking a seat. Taking a seat makes you replaceable, making an impact makes you invaluable. Don't play small. The world can't afford for you to wait.** We need you NOW!

Never allow doubt to thwart your aspirations and dreams, for **doubt kills more dreams than failure ever will.** Continue to do just what you've done on this campus throughout your educational career, speak up, and speak out. Your voice matters. Use it! No one owes you anything and you must work to succeed. Your ideas can effectuate change. Create your own success. Always look for ways to demonstrate that you are invaluable. Be willing to take on more than what you are assigned. That's leadership. Get comfortable being uncomfortable. That's how you grow. When you find yourself in a position within your career that seems like you standing still- go... my motto throughout my life has been sometimes **TO GROW YOU'VE GOTTA GO.**

As you pursue your various disciplines understand that success will not come overnight. The only things that are instant are grits and oatmeal. The elevator to success is out of order. You must climb the stairs to success and be willing to do the small before you can obtain the corner office. And as your climb remember **failure is a stepping stone to greatness.** It is not the falling down that counts it's the getting back up and trying again that distinguishes the great from the average.

As graduates of a women's college, we must be change agents. That's the power you

have been given with this unique education. You know your capabilities because of all that you have learned about yourself and the world during these past four years.

Women are still underrepresented in leadership in many boardrooms, occupations, and leadership positions in America. But Sweet Briar women jump over broken rungs to land in leadership roles that change the tenor of a room, the vibes of a company, and a world awaiting your arrival. Because our world desperately needs you there is no time in playing small. I need you to know this.

Your future starts today, right now. Not tomorrow. Follow your passion and whatever it is you want to do don't allow yourself to make excuses. If opportunity doesn't knock build a door.

Finally, SERVE....Go, Be, and Do and as you create opportunity for yourself remember to serve others.

Service is the rent you pay for your space here on Earth. You undertook your bachelor's degree for your future, for your own prosperity. That is a necessary and vital component to success. That is important but ultimately this accomplishment benefits you and your family and while that is important remember **service is what life is all about.** Women Lead, but **if service is beneath you, then leadership is beyond you.** Make it a point to find ways to serve others. True service is beyond what you do for a living. You must be mindful that humanity demands that you do something for others. Our world is in need of those who recognize the importance of helping others with no expectation of anything in return. Remember, **we make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.**

Make it a point to volunteer your time and energy to make the world better and in turn, make yourself better. Think about how our country has evolved and

prospered. Many of the most pivotal moments in our history involved people who simply served, who were not paid for the change they created. There are so many institutions in our world that need your time and intellectual gifts- whether it's in the schools within your community, summer enrichment programs, non-profit entities, homeless shelters, the list is endless. Even serving within your own neighborhoods can be empowering for others. Just remember life's most persistent and urgent question is and always will be, what are you doing for others? Serve this institution, Sweet Briar College, by giving her your time and/or your treasure because she gave unselfishly to you.

Audacious Sweet Briar Vixens Class of 2023 go boldly into this world that desperately needs you pursuing your passion while building doors to walk through in service to yourself and others. We need you. The world is waiting.