

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Chemistry Convocation

May 14, 2023

Remarks: Alveda J. Williams, Ph.D.

Thank you so much for the kind introduction.

To Chair (Cathy Murphy), the faculty and staff of the Department of Chemistry, parents, guests and most importantly to the Class of 2023... good afternoon. It is so good to be here! I was originally invited for the 2020 convocation. But as we all know, 2020 had other plans. And so, I count it a personal honor and a professional privilege to finally be with you today.

This is a milestone moment. It's a milestone for you – as it marks the culmination of you completing your Bachelor's, Master's, or Ph.D. degree in Chemistry. But it is also not lost on me that it was exactly 20 years ago this weekend that I missed the opportunity to return to campus for my own convocation. So, as I stand here today donning this regalia for the first time, I share in the immense sense of pride, achievement, and excitement that you all have because...

You have finished what you started.

You have done so at one of the best institutions (and best chemistry departments) on the planet.

You have done it all while navigating some of the greatest challenges of our time – a global pandemic, a national reckoning on race, political divisiveness... and so much more.

And yet today, you join a community of innovators and inventors, educators and executives, doctors and directors, lawyers and laureates...that call this great place our alma mater. What I know for sure is that ***the opportunities ahead of you with a degree in chemistry are endless, and the possibilities are great!***

I know this because since leaving Illinois, I have enjoyed a career in industry that has taken me from the laboratory bench to the C-suite of a Fortune 500 company. In fact, I often get asked the question (and I know you're all thinking it), "how in the world did you go from chemistry to the work of inclusion, diversity, and equity (ID&E)?" Well, I certainly didn't plan it that way. Because the last time I checked, there is absolutely no reason to take p-chem or graduate-level statistical mechanics to do this work. Seriously, there's a story there. But the short version is this – my passion, my purpose, and my skills intersected. I always knew I had a passion for chemistry; it's why I chose Illinois. I was enjoying a great career as a young researcher at Dow. But from the very beginning, I noticed that I was always bolting on work that played to this other passion of mine – a passion for people.

My purpose in life has always been clear – to do meaningful work and to make the biggest difference possible. And because I was open to change and willing to try new things, it was a single pivot into HR 11 years ago that paved the way for the role that I now have as Dow's Chief Inclusion Officer. So, what looks like a quantum career leap from chemistry to ID&E was really just a simple move from one area of strength and passion to another.

But there's no question in my mind that the two are linked. The work that we do in chemistry to deliver innovative solutions to make everyday lives better and to address the world's toughest challenges – energy and climate change, clean sustainable water supply, decent affordable housing, food safety and security – this work requires diversity of background, perspective, and experience at the design and decision-making tables. It requires cultures of inclusion, collaboration and co-creation to bring the best thinking forward. And it requires fairness in institutional practices, processes, and policies so that everyone, regardless of their difference, has an equal opportunity to show up and contribute their best.

I bring to my role my own lived experiences growing up as a young black girl in southeastern Virginia who just loved science; with a father who only had a 9<sup>th</sup> grade education and a mother who has a high school diploma; the youngest of 4 children, the only girl, the first to graduate college and the only to go on to graduate school; the aunt of a now 30 year old young man who was born missing half of his 5<sup>th</sup> chromosome and has never enjoyed life as many of us know it because of a severe disability; a niece and a nephew who identify at LGBTQ+. This work for me is not just about passion. It's not political. It's personal.

I bring to it all that I learned while studying chemistry here at the University of Illinois. Yes...critical thinking skills, data-based decision making, and the ability to identify and follow a critical path matter even in the business of people. I learned how to take risks and came to appreciate that failure didn't have to be considered fatal. In fact, as someone once said, "if you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative".

But I also learned over those five years what it was like to truly feel welcomed and a sense of belonging, despite being one of only a few in the department at the time that looked like me. Before the word "allyship" was ever a part of my regular vocabulary, I experienced it on this campus. I am reminded of a moment at the end of my first year of graduate school when Professor Dana Dlott asked me to be his teaching assistant for statistical mechanics the following year. If I am being honest, I thought he had lost his mind! For one, that class was the most humbling of my academic career – I got a whole 32 points out of 100 on my first exam. And two, I came with an outside fellowship and had already met my teaching requirements. So, I would essentially be working for free and that didn't sound like a deal to me! But Dana said to me "I want you to do it. And here's why I want you to do it. Because I know that there are some people who don't believe you can do it. And I know you can!"

I share all of that because it has shaped who I am, informed my perspectives, and I bring it all to my work. Dana Dlott, Jim Lisy, my own advisor Vinay Gupta, and so many others here at Illinois believed in me all those years ago. And that made all the difference. So, graduates... I want you to know that I believe in each of you... because I know first-hand the hard work, dedication, and stick-to-it-tiveness that has brought you to this day.

Remember, chemistry is about enhancing lives. Whether you use your chemistry degree to address the challenges of our time, to educate the next generation of scientists, to accelerate positive impact in our communities, or... to drive towards a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable world... I know that ***the opportunities for you are endless, and the possibilities are great.***

The rigor of problem solving you've developed here...the foundational knowledge... the depth of expertise... the research experiences ... the mentorship of your professors ... the network with your classmates... all position you to relentlessly pursue your passion. Just remember... your

passion may evolve over time. It may materialize in different ways. There are no rules, except one – to draw upon your amazing talents and the breadth of your imagination to do work that is meaningful to you and that will make a difference for others.

Congratulations and I wish you all the best!