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How to Lead, be Special, and Witness History

When a historical event takes place we always remember where we were when that event occurred. History becomes a different story when we witness it. If someone is involved, their own story is created, intertwined with history, to make one interesting bedtime story later on down the road. I experienced history this year in Washington D.C. when I had the opportunity to witness the Inauguration of President Barack Obama. The predicted history screamed out at me from every headline and news channel, but it was not until I was standing in the Mall with two million other silent people beholding the history live that it really hit me. The 44th President of the United States was sworn in, and when his Address was put forth; a pin could have been heard hitting the concrete—if there had been room for it to fall. Normally, being shoulder to shoulder with a group of two million strangers would be an uncomfortable situation, being squished together for two and a half hours brought about a sense of unity to us. It felt as if each person was no longer a stranger, but instead a part of the “one nation” that we live in. Standing amongst all of those strangers, the college girl from San Francisco, the older man who had a major height advantage, the two older women who were eager to witness history in their lifetime, I felt like I belonged with all of them. There was a sense of unity amongst the crowd from the moment we began chanting, “OBAMA” to the moment when we were dead quiet.

When Obama spoke, the world stood still. I bowed my head so that I could absorb the words and the moment of history all at once. Looking back, I remember most when Obama said

that the “challenges we face” as Americans: “will be met.” The inspiration lit up an excitement and intensity inside each person standing at the Mall that day. Change had come, perfection was not achievable, but the problems were going to be addressed and that was the hope that America was clinging to.

In Washington D.C., I was expecting to witness history, but what I was not expecting was to be inspired by not just Obama, but by Desmond Tutu and Colin Powell. The conference I was attending in D.C. scheduled these speakers for our event, but they were more than just scheduled speakers. They inspired my generation to be great leaders and world changers in this time of history changing and America developing. They were encouraging and convincing that my generation would be the key to success in our worlds’ future.

Desmond Tutu would not let a single person in the room of thousands of kids think that they were unimportant. He made us repeat to him, “I am a very special person. I am a VSP.” He made me believe that our generation was going to have great power and success in the world. Tutu even advised us, “Don’t allow yourselves to be affected by the cynicism of oldies like me.” Laughter followed, because out of all of the people I have heard speak in my life-he had to be the least cynical. I did not hear a single negative comment issue from his mouth. When he jumbled up his words at one point he did not try to start over or blush, instead he did a crazy little dance around the stage to refocus and then went right on speaking. I have never felt so at ease listening to a speaker as when Tutu spoke.

Colin Powell was a more reserved man, but nonetheless he was still powerful with his words and very deliberate. Powell inspired us to be not only special but leaders as well. He encouraged us to, “Start with a vision” and then “...have a sense of purpose.” He conveyed leadership in a few new ways that were interesting to me. The biggest point being: “Leadership

is followership.” He inspired us to be the leaders of our generation as we enter an interesting time in our world and our nation. Powell also encouraged us to lead by example through service. “Selfless service, not selfish service,” Powell said. The heart of this statement rang close to home for me. It was understandable and believable, and I soaked up every moment of his speech.

Between vigorously taking notes on every word I could pick up and taking pictures with my limited zoom capabilities, I intently learned more than what I expected in D.C. It turns out I was not just there to witness history; I was there to witness other leaders besides Obama share their feelings about our country to my generation. Listening to Powell and Tutu, I felt like I was listening to a grandparent tell family stories to me; even though, Powell wanted us to know that if we thought he was old we should come ride with him in his Corvette. I would take up that opportunity the minute it came up; of course, even if it doesn’t ever happen, I am still a VSP.