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2013 winner  
Spoke to students March 2015

It is such an honor to be here with you today, along with my fellow Distinguished Alums, Louise Beard, Arthur Henley and Warren St. John in absentia, and to have a chance to say to Mrs. Whiteside how much I admire and appreciate her. And, I'm so glad to be able to tell the teachers and staff, as well, how much I respect them. I have a confession to make- which is, I wish I could be a student again with you, sitting in those seats next to you. What I would give to be in Mr. Palmer's class! I am hungrier to learn today than I was as a student in the 70's.

I believe that we are shaped by our childhoods and yet we come into the world with a certain hardwiring, with characteristics that are a part of us like the skin on our bodies and these don't change even as we age into adulthood. I thought I would tell you a little about where I came from and how Altamont helped me become the person I am today.

I am the middle of three girls, all graduates of this school. My older sister, Cathy is a Real Estate Developer, advocate for the City of Birmingham and a visionary. She was always the prettiest of us, always the sweetest and inclusive and had so many friends and boyfriends! (Her best friend Mary once told me that she called her one afternoon and said, "Mary, I need your help! I have 8 dates lined up for tonight! Can you stand in for me?")

My younger sister, Leigh, who works for Time Inc, has the perfect job where she uses so many of her gifts! She is the Executive Producer of Video Production. She was quiet and studious as a child and because she excelled in school her teachers loved her. Mr. Hames saw her genius and suggested she go to Brown University. After Brown, she studied at The University of Paris, (thanks to Madame Classe) and went on to get a Masters in Comparative Literature at Columbia in NYC. Seeing her consistent efforts reminded me that I needed to work harder, that I was not as smart as she was. Oh, inadequacy set in early!

In families, most siblings are really different. And, it is often living with these differences day to day that help us define ourselves.

I was a strong willed and opinionated child, and in the old days I would rather be right than in relationship. I believe it was this rigidity that made me defiant. (Oh, my poor parents!) In my defense, I was also extremely disciplined, driven and creative, all part of that hardwiring I talked about. Examples of this are- At age 10, I was running a mile with my parents before school every morning, and every summer I organized a circus in our backyard, and a Christmas pageant every December with the 20 or more children in our neighborhood. They called me Bossy Slossy!

Our childhood was simple- (only 3 channels to choose from on our home TV), we were safe, healthy and loved by our parents. Then, I turned 13 and it was like an unhappy, questioning alien entered my body!! I tell you this because I'm wondering if this has happened to any of you?

A friend, not even a good friend, encouraged me to try cigarettes. I coughed and threw up. At 15, that unhappiness that felt like a fog allowed me to get into things that put me at risk. I was making some very bad choices.

My mother sensed I was on the wrong path, hanging out with the wrong crowd. So, she wisely enrolled me and my sister, Leigh, into Brooke Hill School. The summer before would be the beginning of my transformation. I saw a poster at an outdoor store describing a North Carolina Outward Bound survival course. The physical challenge appealed to me, so I enrolled that June and it was on the four day solo experience in the woods that I began my required summer reading- *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens. That month in the woods taught me about team work, and the most important lesson that I carry with me to this day is that I can do anything I set my mind to, including the 12 1/2 mile run at the end of the course.

I started Brooke Hill in the fall of my junior year where I felt so welcomed. It must have been that the girls who had been there since the 5th grade were so glad to see a new face! The teachers wanted me to do my best. With their encouragement and guidance, the academic light bulb went on! I hope this happens for each of you. If it hasn't yet, it will at some time in your life. I was so excited about learning!! I was thriving! Are you thriving at Altamont? The teachers and students in this nurturing and demanding school changed me!. Latin with Mrs. McNair and Spanish with Señora Benejam; Mrs. Ackermann had all of us spellbound with her talks on Isak Denison and Dostoyevski. There was a new dark room where we could develop our negatives and print our photos, but it was nothing like Mrs. Hunter's photo lab! Guess what? Today, thirty years later I am using my skills from my Speech Class and from the Poetry Contest. And, my typing and journalism classes helped me with the editorial skills I've needed to complete my second book. The first was entitled, *Larger Than Life, Memories of Carl Martin Hames*. Have you heard of him, by chance? He was a legend around here, a larger than life character who loved the arts and history and literature and became Headmaster at Altamont before Mrs. Whiteside. He was one of these teachers who cared for, encouraged and guided his students to pursue their natural God given talents.

Fast forward-

College, a graduate semester in London, an assortment of jobs to help me find my skill set, marriage to the man of my dreams, and three children later, Tom, Cassie and Lillie, two who graduated from Altamont and one from Deerfield in upstate Massachusettes. When Tom and Lillie were here in school, their experience was much like mine 30 years earlier. They walked the same halls, received delicious meals from someone almost as talented as Mrs. Grissom; they were required to read the classics, which expanded their worlds and helped them with critical thinking. My son Tom, who was more of an outdoorsman and athlete, sang in the choir with Mr. Tibbs while playing soccer with Mr. Gibson, discovering whole new sides of himself. Lillie excelled in sports as well, and with the encouragement of Mr. Palmer, Coaches Gibson, Beard, Kirkpatrick, Mulkey and Ralph Patton, she played two sports a season, while excelling in her academics. This would never have been possible if she had been attending a public school. She developed her mind by pursuing her interests, and her participation in many athletic competitions helped her learn to compete and to excel. She now lives in NYC and is working for Ralph Lauren in buying and selling, using her Management Information Systems or MIS degree from the UGA. Tom graduated from the Cox Business School at SMU in Dallas and works in Costa Rica for a private hospital as a Director of Financial Planning and Budgeting. He had seven years of Spanish while at Altamont and this instilled in him a love of cross cultural communication. He speaks Spanish all day every day, conducting his business affairs in Spanish.

Tom and Lillie both received an excellent education at Altamont, in a setting where who you were and what you did mattered to the teachers. What we shared in these halls and classrooms is that we felt valued and respected by the faculty and staff. They cared about us and we were a part of something bigger than ourselves. We belonged.

This saved my life and saved me from making some bad choices at a critical time in my life.

I want to make sure the current faculty, your teachers hear this: that I see the same kind of dedication, love, caring and commitment to your students' growth that I felt when I was here years ago. You give your heart and souls every day and I see it when I observe your interactions with students and when we hear reports at Board meetings.

I have continued to be involved with the school, serving on the Alumuni Association and now on the Board of Trustees. I do it as a way of giving back. You too will have this opportunity after you graduate one day, and you might feel, like me, that you want to be back in these classrooms.

Those hardwiring parts of myself that I mentioned earlier- well, it was Sheryl Sandberg, the Chief Operating Officer of Facebook who said that women who are labeled "bossy" are really demonstrating leadership! With my bossy, organizational skills I started a small business with my best friend in 2003, a Pilates studio that we operated for 11 years. I have just completed my second book about a spiritual giant named John Claypool; It is entitled, *Life is Gift*; My husband and I have been working in the Peace movement through Rotary International. And, because of my dear mother's influence on me as well as the choral director at Brooke Hill, Mrs. Lynch, I sing in the choir at our church. I am who I am today because of the gifts that Altamont has given me. I carry them with me.

While you are searching for your passions, your strong interests and the things that attract you like magnets, you will be given choices- like choosing your fall classes, where you will go to college, your major field of study and ultimately your job- keep your eyes open to what the needs are in the world and be a part of solving them.

It is a great privilege for me to speak to you today. You would not be a student here unless you had earned your way and distinguished yourself. Keep at it!