

Shaquan McDowell

Commencement Speech

Social Justice; Truth, even unto it's inner most parts: These phrases set at the center of our community. From the day you walk into the insanity known as orientation, to the mornings midterms wade in your mind, these words are set; endlessly they circulate in your head. They play on repeat. They breathe in the back of your brain. They appear in front of you...plastered on the buildings of North, in big bold Hebrew script, with blue signage. They're inescapable.

Yet when asked about them and what they mean, our responses are even greater than the experience. With that unmistakable Brandeisians beam glowing from our eyes, we look directly into theirs and confidently declare, "I have no idea." Perplexed, they peer back at us, internally asking, how is that possible. How does one walk through life, adhering to certain principles, yet not completely comprehend what those principles entail? A so we start to ponder this as well. How is it being so?

This is the Brandeisians question. The one live in. A paradox of some sorts. We set forth on a pursuit to institute these ideals into the world, while at the same time investigating their true definition. For the most part, we've accepted this fact and ignore it in conversation. It never leaves our mind, but still we don't seek to engage it publically. From my time here, however, I believe I've reached a point where I'm willing to take bravely take a chance; addressing an unavoidable part of our collective identity. Bare with me though, I don't claim to be an expert.

Being the history and politics major I am, it would be impossible for me to properly convey my point, without using a historical reference. It is no secret that I believe we better

understand our current selves, by revisiting the footsteps, our ancestors have already trod. Tracks have always possessed the ability to lead us where we need to go, and this is no except.

I want to point you to 1810, Upstate South Carolina. Light skin covers the body of child, who's societal status, has been attached to inferiority. Blue eyes glare at a sky, that would for years, be clouded in gray. Her name is Elizabeth. She is of mixed ancestry. She will grow to exist in a world uncomfortable with her identity. Where she belongs or she fits is questioned, shrouded in ambiguity. Assuming the role of outsider, for the remainder of her life, she will be will exist seemingly, on the periphery.

Yet, one day Elizabeth becomes a mother. Into her children she invests, pours out. She insists on insuring that they ascend to a higher status, than she has been given; acquiring more opportunities than she ever possessed. This lifelong commitment to those around her, even when she was rejected and revered as unimportant, by the world around her, would gift to her children the platform they needed: They would proceed to become land owners, educators, and active members of their community. Elizabeth would seemingly fade into the distance, but the impact she made, would manifest for generations to follow.

I know this for a fact, as Elizabeth was my 5x great grandmother. I've read her story a thousand times, throughout my childhood, but it was not until coming to Brandeis that I began to see her story, in a new unique lens. For many of you, I am sure you are wondering, "What in the world does this have to do with answering the definition of social justice and how it relates to Brandeisians?"

First and foremost, lets recognize the fact that many of the qualities found in Elizabeth, are also attributes of our Brandeisians body. In many forms, we are unique: it's an undeniable

fact that there is nothing like a Brandeisians. We are unique in every element of the word. Nothing about us is conventional, and in many ways, we are not the expected.

Additionally, like Elizabeth, many of us are restricted: various barriers block us from making the steps we want to take, or actively engaging in the arenas we desire to affect. Whether they are societal or internally, challenges parade around us, and so heavily fight against, the positive change, we direct ourselves to.

But like Elizabeth, we don't allow these challenges or the lack of expectation, to prevent us. Rather instead, we carefully consider the individual moments to make change that are afforded, and we act on them. From participation in larger societal moments, to investing in the the individuals around us, we value each opportunity, no matter how small, as important in its own right.

We recognize that larger moment, is made in these little moments. In the way that Elizabeth invested in her children and changed the trajectory of the society around us, we invest in our peers, our community, socially redefining larger norms along the way, even when we are unaware. That my friends are social justice. It is the belief that each individual is worth in vesture, attention, and inclusion. It is the individual acts of compassion, which acknowledge one another's humanity and greater social impact that will bring. This is what is true, even unto its inner most parts. This is what it means to be a Brandeisians. From the top floor of the SCC, to the rehearsal rooms of Slos, I've seen this. From Mandel G03, to the "Charles River Apartments", I've seen it.

It's in our respect for the little moments and the little people and the belief that each minute, is important to changing a broader end. This is what's true, even unto its inner most parts. This is what it means to be a Brandeisians.