

SPEECH

Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today.

My name is Toni Preckwinkle and I'm Alderman of the 4th Ward and the Democratic candidate for Cook County Board President.

Early in my Aldermanic career, I was asked to give a graduation address. So I asked my son, who was nine years old at the time, for his advice on what I should say. He said, "Mom, it doesn't matter what you say, just as long as you keep it short". Since then, I've made it to follow that sound advice and I promise not to be up here for too long.

I first came to Chicago when I was 18 years old to go to the University of Chicago. I got a degree in General Studies in the Social Sciences which I always say is a dilettante's major.

That was in 1965 and I've been here ever since.

I am a teacher by profession - I spent 10 years in the classroom teaching high school history.

As a history teacher, I've often said that democracy is both the best and most fragile form of government in the world for the same reason - it requires an active, engaged citizenry.

And that's why what you have accomplished here is so important.

You have been given a unique opportunity – one few people receive – to study the humanities at the highest level — literature, philosophy, history, art history, writing and critical thinking — taught by some of the best, and probably toughest faculty from world class institutions.

Not everyone understands the importance of studying the humanities.

We are living through conditions that our country has not faced since the Great Depression.

Too many people throughout the county and the country are losing their jobs, their homes and their hope.

And for those who have kept their homes, jobs, and health insurance - there remains a deep sense of anxiety.

Programs like this one are critical to both our social and political health.

Programs that strive not only to impart wisdom but also to engage students in critical thinking; to provide an environment that encourages questions, opinions, dialogue and even disagreements.

The humanities challenge our assumptions in ways that most things cannot and do not. They expand our understanding, and push us to view our world in new ways.

This isn't only important for your life and your future - but for the future of our county, our state and our country.

When I first declared my candidacy for Cook County Board President, I would be stopped in the street by people who identified themselves as County employees.

They would tell me that, while they were working hard, they were discouraged by those in the office who read the newspaper all day or spent the day making personal calls.

That lack of accountability not only saps resources from critical programs and services, it also erodes taxpayer's confidence that Cook County government can effectively represent their interests.

Therefore, my focus has always been to forge a broad and diverse coalition, crossing the racial, ethnic and geographic lines of the County.

But you cannot wait to be called on. I urge you to apply the same energy you applied to your studies to public service.

I hope that some of you have worked in a political campaign.

I've been working in political campaigns since I was 16 years old.

I worked for Katie McWatt, who was the first African American woman to run for City Council in St. Paul.

I started out knocking on doors, licking stamps, stuffing envelopes. Unfortunately she did not win, but I decided I liked politics. When I came to Chicago for college I continued to work in campaigns.

I believe that it's important to not only vote, but to actively engage in politics.

Casting your vote is only your first obligation as a citizen. But that alone is insufficient.

Good citizens must also contribute their time and money to the candidates they believe in. It's the only way to keep our democracy strong.

When citizens become engaged, good things can happen. We all learn from each other. Initiatives get catalyzed. People become active in improving their communities.

Politicians and citizens alike would become more informed and learn from each other. And take an important step towards participatory democracy.

We could begin to see how power can be exercised through people, not over people.

That is the purpose of education – and the power of the humanities - to remind us of what we each have to offer, to help us understand our history and imagine our future; to give us hope in times of hardship; and to unite us when nothing else will.

That is what we celebrate here today.

Thank you again. Congratulations to the graduating class and to The Odyssey Program for 10 years of encouraging and empowering.