



Dr. Joycelyn Elders Shares Insights with Gladstone Staff

In a dynamic talk peppered with equal amounts of trademark humor, advocacy, and statistics, former U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Joycelyn Elders spoke to an SRO crowd at Carr Auditorium on March 12.

“My mother told me to speak the truth. The day you see the truth and fail to speak, you die—so I’ll live a *long* time,” she quipped, setting the tone of her address and of a follow-up roundtable discussion.

The comment drew a large laugh because Dr. Elders, a distinguished professor of public health at the University of Arkansas, had already spoken the truth as she saw it on everything from the inadequacies of America’s health insurance system to the benefits of affirmative action.

Sponsored by Gladstone and the UCSF Center for Gender Equity, Dr. Elders’s talk, “Building Diverse Institutions—The Challenges of Diversity: Health Care Education, Delivery, and Responsibility,” was open to all employees and SFGH staffers as well. A key theme was a call for scientists and health care professionals to engage and excite underrepresented children about careers in biomedical science starting as early as elementary school.

Her many words of wisdom and calls to action during her talk included:

“We need to deal with the three p’s: poverty, population, and pollution.”

“What we have is an expensive sick care system—the sicker you get, the better we doctor. Everybody has sick care—you just have to get sick enough.”

“The people who can make universal health care happen already *have* it.”

“Children who are members of the 5H club are helpless, hungry, hugless, hopeless, and without healthcare.”

“Affirmative action is medicine for sick institutions.”

“The 10 most powerful words in the language are, ‘If it is to be, it is up to me.’”

And words of wisdom from her mother, with whom she worked in cotton fields as a child: “If you want to get out of the cotton patch, you have to put something in your head.”

When Dr. Elders entered the University of Arkansas School of Medicine in 1956, she was the sole woman and one of only three African-Americans in a graduating class of 100. As U.S. Surgeon General—the first African-American woman to serve in that post—she argued the case for universal health coverage and was a spokesperson for President Clinton’s health care reform effort. She was a strong advocate for comprehensive health education, including sex education, in schools.

Candid and forthright in her views, she was forced to resign after only 15 months in the position as a result of a controversial remark about sex education.

In her talk, Dr. Elders emphasized that the absence of minorities among the scientific staff at academic institutions is a reflection of the low number of underrepresented individuals choosing scientific careers. She stressed the importance of encouraging young women and minority students to pursue careers in science and of starting mentoring programs for disadvantaged youth. She suggested that academic scientists and healthcare personnel could serve as strong advocates for the disenfranchised, catalyzing change in government priorities toward expanded health insurance and public health programs for the growing number of underserved and uninsured.

Dr. Elders spoke from a uniquely personal point of view during a follow-up roundtable discussion, “Challenges of Being a Black Woman in the ‘White’ House,” for approximately 30 participants in the Building 40 fourth floor conference room. In a forthright question and answer session, she talked candidly about her impoverished early childhood, starting her career, finding strong mentors, her years as the Director of Public Health for the state of Arkansas, her White House tenure and dismissal, the difficulties of juggling family and career, particularly in a period when her husband suffered from an extended bout of clinical depression, and her concerns about the quality of public health programs in the U.S. today.

The afternoon of activities culminated in a well attended reception in the Building 3, 5th floor library, open to all Gladstone employees. The talk and related events, part of a series, “Building Diverse Institutions,” were coordinated by Wendy Peters, Jutta Neuenburg, Vanessa Soros, Laura Napolitano and Amy Levine. The series has also included a talk by Dr. Haile Debas, Dean and Chancellor Emeritus of UCSF, who visited Gladstone earlier this year to discuss his personal and professional experiences working in multicultural environments around the world.

Gladstone has two groups working on issues related to women and minorities in science, including the volunteers who’ve been working on the “Building Diverse Institutions” series. The second group seeks to encourage minority interest in science by involving Gladstone scientists in local schools. We’ll hear more about their initiatives in future issues of *The Messenger*.

“These problems have plagued academic institutions for years, and we simply can't ignore them,” says Bob Mahley. “Keeping these critical issues before us at all times is the only way to truly solve them.”