

A speech given to International Women Associates Chicago in response to receiving the 2008 Women Extraordinaire Award by Bliss W Browne March 2008

IWA: Friendship and Public Life

It's such a joy to receive this award from IWA because you are devoted to what has been the animating energy in my life—friendship and global understanding. I spent last month working in Denmark, South Africa and Montana. My 96 year old father and 84 year old mother joined me in South Africa for three weeks. I'll spend next week working in Scotland and Senegal. My love of travel and of global work in community comes from having lived abroad as a child and being the beneficiary of the generous hospitality of friends all over the world. Loving family and friends have made my life extraordinary.

It's also touching to share this time with good friends whose love, ideas, enthusiasm and generosity have enriched my life so immeasurably...my neighbor and hostess with the mostest Diane Ciral, Funmi Olopade, physician and humanist extraordinaire with whom I have shared raising families and teaching Sunday school, Imagine Chicago board members Therese Rowley and Nancy Cobb, mother of Imagine Englewood extraordinaire Jean Carter Hill, my sister Carol who was my dream roommate from the day she was born. Given how much time I spend on airplanes, I don't deserve to have any Chicago friends left. But good friends love you through it all. Thank you for coming today. My friend Sharon Parks once said to me that it made no sense to her to have her portrait painted as an image of one person, that the only portrait that would make sense was a composite portrait with the faces of all those who had touched her life. I look out at all of you and see how extraordinarily I have been blessed by those who have touched my life. To those of you in the room I am meeting for the first time today, thank you for welcoming me. I hope to have the chance to get to know you better. I'm sure I will like you because you value friendship and have set time aside for it. I'd like to pay tribute to all of you, and to the mission of the IWA, by sharing a few stories of friendship and the extraordinary blessing and courage it unleashes.

It's serendipitous that this event is happening at the Union League Club since this was my very first home in Chicago, when my family moved here from Brazil in 1961. I'm the middle of five children born in Atlanta who moved to Sao Paulo when I was eight. There we learned quickly to speak Portuguese, to be a guest in someone else's language. Our parents saw the ease with which young children learned a new language and promptly hired a French tutor three days a week for us. So we became trilingual as children. It was a great life, going to an international school with children from all over the world, spending weekends at the "bosque" watching a sloth move impossibly slowly in a tree.

When I was ten, my father was transferred by Sears Roebuck from Sao Paulo to Chicago. So on New Year's Day, 1961, our family arrived by train here from New Orleans, having traveled to that port by ship from Brazil. Since our Chicago house was not yet ready, we took up temporary residence for several weeks at the Union League Club. My parents' good friend from Atlanta, Jimmy Porter, was an out of town member and arranged for us to stay here. I remember well that the Club had a separate entrance for ladies and gentlemen, which I had never seen before, and

found very curious. Why have separate entrances which fed into the same lobby? But perhaps it was an early alert to notice different ways of seeing, that we come at life from different angles. In any event, Chicago soon became home for us, as it is to people from all over the world.

The hospitality one receives in a place makes a world of difference in whether it ever becomes home. When we make friends, build trust, find acceptance and love, we know that community is possible and meant for us. We discover the safety to get engaged and make a difference. When cultural differences are honored, when people are curious to learn about who we are and grow in their respect and understanding, peace seems more possible in the world. Our imagination gets stretched by other perspectives and we become bigger people able to see and understand more.

My youngest daughter Elizabeth is moving to Beijing this Friday to learn Mandarin and work there; her older brother has been living there for three years. It is a source of unbelievable satisfaction to me that my children have chosen to venture into a culture which is so genuinely different, so ancient in its stories and wisdom, and so key to the world's future. I am delighted they see themselves as global citizens, a perspective I credit to my parents who made the world home for all of our family by their love of learning, commitment to foreign language and travel as essential to our education, and respect for other ways of seeing. Their considerable gift to all their children and grandchildren is lifelong membership in a vital intergenerational learning community that spans the world.

Human beings are curious and vulnerable beings, shaped and stretched by a mystery within and around us. We must constantly choose between hope and despair, connection and isolation, love and fear, and the choices we make affect the choices of those around us. Each of us needs communities to which to belong and from which we can learn and draw necessary courage. To quote my friend Sharon Parks again, "Moral courage is a by product of the community to which we belong."

At the turn of the 21st century, vital intergenerational learning communities are especially critical. Why? I'll summarize my answer with a lighthearted quotation I saw recently, "Just when you think you see the whole picture of life clearly, the channel changes." As human beings, we are facing many adaptive challenges, challenges for which the learning in hand is simply not sufficient to the challenges at hand.

Many of those adaptive challenges are familiar: the global context of democratization and an interdependent world economy; ecological imbalances which affect the seamless web of living relationships; knowledge and information resources expanding exponentially; cultural diversity and interaction increasing in ways which require new cooperation and mutual learning; shifting organizational patterns changing the nature of work and the relationships of individuals to work environments. When human beings are under threat, we often retreat to what is safest, what we know. But we can choose instead, even in that vulnerable moment, to reach out, and our common future depends on choosing to do so..

All around the world, brave people are making friends across difference, creating communities and generative spaces where structured exchanges of ideas, resources and experiences nurture

understanding and hope and expand what's possible to imagine and create. Communities are gathering to imagine and create new possibilities for their collective future.

In September 2002, I witnessed something especially hopeful. 150 people from 16 countries came together in Chicago for a week. They came from projects with names like Imagine Nepal and Imagine Nagaland, Imagine Cape Town and Imagine Chile, Imagine Gotland and Imagine Scotland. They ranged in age from 6 months to 91 years. They represented ten faith traditions and included artists and businessmen, city managers and high school students, cabinet level ministers and retirees, university professors and people living in homeless shelters. They flew across the ocean on Sept. 11 in spite of terrorist threats and a pervasive culture of fear and violence. What brought them together was confidence that imagination can transform communities.

For me, it was a magical week. A Palestinian-Jewish team from Israel shared stories of building cultural understanding in Jerusalem and discussed with the team from Cape Town lessons learned from the struggle against apartheid. A young Australian who had previously attempted suicide laughed and drummed with his new West Indian friend from London. Over 3 days, over 60 conversations were convened in open space fueled by the passionate questions, hopes and struggles of the participants. Together with Chicago neighborhood activists, our international guests created theatre pieces; made music and discussed strategies for community change. Inspiring questions and *active listening* proved generative. Something renewing happens in the "in-between" space that genuine dialogue creates. When people listen deeply to one another, they honor each other and cultivate the trust and relationships so crucial for friendship and community to be created. They start not only to see, but also to 'hear' the possibilities for a shared future. It was clear that a new movement of global imagination was breaking through the violence, despair and cynicism that have so much of the world in their grip.

It was especially heartening to me to witness and participate in this outpouring of hope because I run an organization called Imagine Chicago, born fifteen years ago as the first Imagine project in the world. At that time, I was living a complicated life as a corporate banker, a parish priest, a civic activist and mother of three young children. These worlds shared little common vocabulary and often held each other in suspicion. I began to wonder what would change if our city could think as a whole rather than operate out of such a divided imagination. My heart ached over the fact that so many people in Chicago, both young and old, were losing their lives prematurely to isolation, despair, violence and addiction. Our city's divisions of race, class, sector, culture, and economic seemed to me institutionalized in political structures, mindsets, and housing patterns. As a priest, my imagination has been shaped by a theology of abundance and inclusion. It would be unthinkable to run out of communion bread before everyone was fed. Why did we not see it as possible for our city to live out of an imagination of abundance in which all are included and able to contribute their gifts to the common good?

Needing friends to share these questions, I organized a conference on faith, imagination and public life, to which I invited many Chicago pioneers who had devoted their lives to making impossible things possible. People introduced themselves by describing an image of hope that

had particular authority in their lives—a story of transformation, a religious symbol, the face of a beloved relative, a waterfall in the rainforest that spoke of the abundance of life. I chose the Rublev icon of the Trinity that depicts three angel-looking characters seated around a table. It was for me a powerful symbol of the heart of life being generative conversation.

Conference participants explored remarkable stories of social innovation and community building in Chicago. We explored the events and ideas which had shaped Chicago's collective imagination. Why, for instance, had we had the guts and creativity to host two World's Fairs and yet couldn't seem to move past a deep and divisive history of racial animosity and segregation? It was clear that Chicago had been distinguished by a rich tradition of invention. It was also evident that our city now stood as a symbol of "divided imagination" – manifested in patterns of racial, economic, social and political segregation. As a mother, banker, priest and community activist, I observed first hand competing worlds which shared little common vocabulary and held each other in great suspicion. What would it take to think from wholeness? What fundamental union might be *revealed* through restoring relationships among those who had been separated by economic, ethnic, religious, gender, geographic or other well-established boundaries?

The second night of the conference, people were invited to name aloud, in words and images, what we believed were "God's dreams" for Chicago, dreams worthy of the commitment of our lives. We identified privately, and then publicly, our deep hopes together with what would be necessary to bring the dreams to birth. We also articulated the resistances we might expect to encounter in ourselves and others in doing so. The exercise provoked extraordinary energy; dream teams were up late into the night.

My image of God's dream for Chicago, new to me in that moment, was of the recycling symbol as an image of the Trinity, and of an economy in which nothing and no one was wasted. This Christian symbol of the belovedness and oneness of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit held my confidence that "life is in the relationships; loving connection and energy is the animating heart of life." The recycling symbol, a cultural image of deep ecology, held my longing for a just economy. This simple image ignited and held my passion for justice. I began to imagine a city...

- *where everyone is valued and no life is wasted.*
- *where every citizen, young and old, develops and contributes their ideas and energy to create a positive future for themselves and their community.*
- *where hope comes alive in the flourishing and connecting of human lives.*

I could imagine vividly and concretely what it would mean and take to live into this dream, to see it as possible. When, at the end of the evening, each of us was asked to write down what we thought our vocation was in Chicago, I simply wrote, "to be God's friend in the city."

The next morning, John McKnight, the pioneer of Asset-Based Community Development, whom I had never met, came to offer a reflection for the conference's closing session. Since we had just spent an evening dreaming big, I asked John to listen to our images of "God's dreams" and comment on them.

John remarked that he was rarely invited to speak to people who shared a faith perspective.” He pulled from his wallet a scrap of paper from which he read the following verses from the gospel of John: “Greater love has no one than this, that a man would lay down his life for his friends. I call you servants no longer. A servant does not know what his master is about. I have called you friends because I have disclosed everything to you that I heard from my Father.” John then proceeded to talk about the importance of bringing friendship into public life, and to distinguish friendship from servanthood. Service, he said is built on needs and contradicts the equality of friendship. Our economy, and the self-image of many, he suggested, thrives on needs to justify a helping role. Friendship involves something much more vital: the mutual recognition of gifts.

To illustrate the point, John showed us a painted burlap map with community buildings labeled “teenage pregnancy”, “drugs”, “high school dropouts”, “gangs”, and “alcoholism.” And he raised the question, “But what about this community’s gifts? Who taught us not to see the gifts?” Then he turned the map over. On the other side, he had relabeled it “citizen talent”, “local enterprise”, “consumer spending”, “association”, “hospitality”, “schools”, and “capital.” John challenged us to think about the ways in which a highly competitive economy was leading to decisions that some people wouldn’t be expected to use their gifts, and others were getting put under such intense pressure they were becoming less able to offer theirs too. Perhaps we needed to change the social equation to bring more friendship into public life. A model of friendship would mean knowing and addressing people by name; acknowledging and celebrating distinctive talents, qualities and contributions, keeping things on a human scale. By contrast, servanthood fed on the anonymous ‘they’-- the ‘poor’, the ‘marginalized’, the ‘homeless’-- who remained anonymous because their gifts were not discovered or expected to make a difference.

I was amazed at the serendipity of John’s talk in light of the words I had used the evening before to describe my vocation in Chicago. I had written my thesis in divinity school on friendship. Friendship had long been the priority in my personal life and an enduring source of joy and courage. Whenever I was discouraged, praying for my friends reliably reopened my heart. I could now connect friendship, which I had thought of as personal treasure and spiritual path, to public life, with some helpful mental maps. Many things had come into extraordinary alignment in a surprising and inspiring way, with a defensible and elegant relationship to each other. I was able to see the arc of my life story that had led to this point and could lead beyond it. I left the conference with a sense of astonishing congruence and grace, and a great sense of possibility. Four days later I quit a 16 year corporate career to try and be God’s friend in the city.

Friendship is a particular relationship of mutuality, people who delight in each other’s company, take risks together, laugh, lean on each other. Friends accept us as we are and hold us accountable to the best of what they know we can be. Friends deepen our capacity to love and our confidence that love is possible. Imagine a city characterized by connected and committed individuals who recognize, appreciate, and celebrate each other’s unique gifts!

In September 1992, a group of friends – across a wide range of ages and professions – came together as a "design team" to explore bringing friendship into public life in Chicago. How could we bring alive a new imagination for Chicago’s future that would build community, unleash energy and imagination and lead to a positive future in which everyone would be able to contribute their unique resourcefulness and creativity?

Two key ideas emerged from many months of conversation which ultimately shaped the design of what became "Imagine Chicago". First, the project should attempt to discover what gives life to the city, and second, that it should provide significant leadership opportunities for youth, who most clearly represent the city's future. From September 1992 to May 1993, the team designed a process of intergenerational civic inquiry as the starting point for engaging the city of Chicago in a broad-based conversation about its future. Imagine Chicago bet on teenagers, who wanted to learn from city leaders how to make a difference, as its first public leadership team. They proved highly effective in creating a space in the city to talk about what mattered and what was possible. Subsequent Imagine Chicago partners have included a wide range of individuals and institutions: grassroots leaders seeking to improve their neighborhoods and learn from the innovations of other committed citizens... public schools working to establish stronger community partnerships... teachers wanting to renew their vocations... immigrant and faith communities committed to exploring the promise of democracy and American pluralism... school children and parents struggling to understand and impact the systems/communities of which they are a part. All have been willing to expand the community to which they belong and to find ways to apply their imagination, talent and commitment within the communities in which they live.

Ronald Marstin, a philosopher, defines justice as fundamentally a matter of who is included and whom we can tolerate neglecting. In 1992 when IC began, the young, the old and the poor, especially people of color, were very vulnerable populations whose isolation was deepening. Intergenerational communication was quickly breaking down and hope for the future was eroding. So Imagine Chicago's initial project was engaging area teenagers living in public housing to interview Chicago "glue people," to understand what would contribute to a positive future for all of CHICAGO and reconnect communities that had been chronically isolated. 50 youth-at-risk interviewed 150+ adult community builders in Chicago about the highlights of their lives as citizens and their hopes and plans for the city's future. Since we were focused on developing our city's future, we wanted the future to be asking questions about the best of the past, learning from that experience and holding adults accountable to the hope that was in them. We knew that in order for new possibilities to be raised up, it would be necessary to disarm the cynicism that passes for sophistication. We thought young people held the best hope for doing that.

The young people asked their conversation partners about highlights of their lives as citizens, what they had been able to create, what they had experienced as effective processes for the city to work together. They were encouraged to ask other questions that arose for them throughout the interview, and to engage the interviewee in as personal and positive a conversation as possible. The young interviewers sent follow-up thank you letters summarizing the conversation, what they had learned and their appreciation for the interviewee's contribution to the life of the city. Young people became agents of hope and inspiration, freed from the negative stereotypes in which they held themselves and were held by others. Conversation with community mentors stretched their view of the human enterprise and their imagination about what was possible by bringing the best of the past into dialogue with the energy and commitment of the future.

One pair that met in this process were Gertrude Nielsen and Tim Wilborn. Gertrude was 96, a mentally alert and astute widow, interested in building strong connections to the next generation, and to life outside her experience. Each year, she celebrated her birthday in the company of 3 year olds at a day care center she established. Tim was 14, black, living in the worst public housing in Chicago. Both were looking for ways to make a difference. Tim asked to interview Gertrude after he met her at a luncheon: Gertrude was a neighbor of our family, but not someone I had known growing up; we became friends in part because I recognized how vigorously she thought about the future, that she sought to keep her mind and spirit active and challenged. She recognized in Tim a kindred spirit, someone willing to struggle and stretch, work hard and learn, value life and contribute to others. She offered to pay his way to college. They became good friends. Tim graduated, two years after Gertrude died just shy of her 101st birthday. He started Imagine Detroit, and two years later, Imagine Serbia.

To live a meaningful life, to see the future as viable, we need a sense that life matters and that our choices make a difference. Our images of what's possible for our lives are hugely shaped by the images available in the prevailing culture. For many people, violence and premature death are not only daily media images but also their experience of local daily life. So we need to create space for building trust, holding one another accountable to the hope that is in us, to give hope room to grow and gain authority in our lives. One way we do that is through friendship, sharing life stories that stretch what we see as possible.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk and social activist, once said, "Living is more than submission; it is creation. Once we begin to change this street and this city, we begin to discover our power to transform the world." Let me share a story about that from the streets of my Uptown neighborhood in Chicago.

When I first met Tina Brumfield, she had just finished an alternative high school and was living in public housing in Chicago. She was brought to Citizen Leaders, a program Imagine Chicago was running for emerging local leaders who wanted to make a difference in their community. Tina didn't say a word in the first three meetings. By the fourth meeting, everyone was supposed to have an idea of the project they wanted to create and who might work with them. Tina cared that a lot of young men in the neighborhood who were her friends were unemployed and in gangs and needed something constructive to do. She wanted to help. She knew guys liked to play basketball but the Park district said they didn't have a league because no one was interested.

So Tina did something very simple. She put up a notice asking young men (18-24 years old) to sign up if they wanted to play basketball. She said she would help organize a team as her Citizen leaders project. Over 200 people signed up the first week. Tina then had to get donations from local businesses...uniforms, balls, court time from the park, and find referees. Suddenly she had a good kind of problem. As she recounted, "Now, I can't hardly walk down the street anymore 'cause of people yelling 'Tina, Tina'... Now everybody wants to talk to me..."

By the end of the summer, there were hundreds of people playing basketball in the Uptown league. Rival gangs played together without fighting. The league led into a leadership development and job-training program for the young men. The Park district built it into their

program. It inspired the starting of other leagues. Tina, who had been unemployed, got job offers from the Park district and a local high school as a community outreach worker because the project had brought out in her and made visible to so many other people her commitment and leadership skills. I remember vividly one of the last classes of Citizen Leaders when one of the participants listening to Tina bubbling in astonishment at all that was happening shouted, “You go girl!” There was no stopping her. A year later, she was a featured interview on the Osgood files on NPR.

Where had Tina begun? With the simple hope that she could make a difference to some friends of hers. Such acts distinguish us as human beings. As it turned out, Tina made a difference that transformed the neighborhood as well as her. She discovered gifts in herself she didn’t know she had. She brought out gifts in others. Her own commitment got leveraged many times over by other people who got inspired by her enthusiasm and got involved themselves. Being part of a visible community project nurtured hope because it provided her an opportunity not only to give of herself but to broaden and deepen the community to which she belonged and from which she could learn. That learning community encouraged her to take the necessary risks that making a difference requires.

The presence of injustice offers a constant invitation to reach out, to build bridges, to include more. *Imagine ‘Imagine’ — the word itself — calls to mind our freedom, our potential, the power and beauty of the unknown, feelings of hope and space for creativity and possibility.* Each and every human being possesses the enormous gift of imagination. Our tremendous human diversity — the variety of dynamic identities we possess — is vital for both the conversations and the actions of creating the future. The greater the diversity of the people involved, and the stronger the movement of imagination, the more likely a balanced and just future becomes for our children and us.

How do we build reliably constructive relationships across well established divides of culture, race, power, privilege? Imagine Chicago has discovered that it helps to treat strangers like friends, by

- Understanding what is (focusing on best of what is)
- Imagining what could be (working in partnerships with others)
- Creating what will be (translating what we value into what we do)

Understand

All Imagine Chicago projects begin with and are grounded in asking and teaching others to ask open-ended, asset and value-oriented questions about what is life-giving, what is working, what is generative, what is important. The focus is on asking positive questions that encourage sharing of best practices, articulation of fundamental values, and which reveal the positive foundation on which greater possibilities can be built. E.g. what is something your child has accomplished that you are especially proud of? What about your family, this school, is especially effective in

encouraging children to learn? What questions interest you most right now? (bene-dictus – saying good things...positive discourse is a form of blessing).

Both Tim and Tina's stories suggest it is possible to create exceptional relationships across well established divides. To do so, in my experience, requires attention to the importance of constructive communication. **Positive framing is powerful.** Human beings of any age are full of potential, rich in strengths and talents, with energy and vitality to dream and create. Even complaints mask a deep desire for change. Conversations can be helped to shift from what our problems and needs are, to how we can harness our capacities to make our lives and communities more vital. Stating affirmatively what we value, what we hope, what we want, enables us (as well as others) to understand and act on behalf of that vision. Reframing negative comments into positive desires can provide a way out of traps and into possibilities. (Jeff Brennan story – “if a kid came to you in the middle of the night and said why should I stay alive, what would you say?)

Conversations are also invigorated by the power of *inspiring questions*. We can investigate anything — trouble or joy. The questions we ask set the agenda and determine what we find. Honest, open questions, asked in a spirit of friendship and genuine interest, enrich and deepen dialogue. They can clarify confusions and open up new images and understandings. Questions invigorate the imagination and stimulate learning and shared understanding. At a time in which the answers in hand are not sufficient for the challenges at hand, asking good questions becomes even more urgent.

Imagine

New possibilities are inspired by hearing questions or stories that cause us to wonder and stretch our understanding beyond what we already know. When we are invited to articulate or hear from others what's important and is working, we readily imagine how even greater transformation and innovation can happen. In a learning community, our collective imaginations continually envisage more. Grass roots leaders discussing what they have helped change on their block inspires others to try and make a difference. Young parents sharing stories of how they are caring for their children leads others to good parenting practices. Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested long ago “a mind once stretched by a new idea never regains its original dimensions”.

Create

For imagination to help create community change, it needs to be embodied in something concrete and practical ...*a visible outcome* that inspires more people to invest themselves in making a difference. In *Citizen Leaders*, the program in which Tina was involved, grass roots leaders are invited to articulate their visions for community change and then create imaginative community development project of their own design. In the course of four months of interactive

forums, they learn to recruit volunteers, design and organize a project, prepare a proposal, and implement, evaluate and sustain their projects. Learning occurs largely through community change agents sharing experiences with each other within a common framework of organizing questions. In 1996, a group of committed citizens involving 6 leaders and 25 team members, from the same low-income Chicago neighborhood, participated together in this program. They created projects including block clubs, community gardens, intergenerational sports programs, and a youth club. With support from a local community organization, these emerging block leaders helped launch a neighborhood-wide program to bring residents together to collectively address important issues. The *Every Block is a Village* program they started is now an organization of 60 block clubs, each with resident 'citizen leaders,' which organizes around community issues like community cleanliness, economic development, and youth opportunities. The process is continually strengthened by sharing stories weekly about what has happened and how and lessons learned. As their successes grow, so does their confidence and skill level. The visible outcomes and growing volunteer effort attract the commitment of other individuals who see it's possible to make a difference. Imagine Nagaland project generated 7000 volunteer interviews and restored peace to a region torn asunder by a 50 year civil war, inspiring UNICEF to consider sponsoring youth-led community inquiry projects in five more states of India.

Sharing creative expression frees the spirit, draws out peoples' deepest urge to be imaginative and connects them to a larger purpose. Imagining a worthy future built on the best of the past brings people together to talk about values and meaning and collective purpose, to listen to one another, to share their personal and collective hopes and aspirations. Such communion generates the energy and commitment required for transforming dreams into realities. When connections are built heart-to-heart, mission-to-mission, the process reinforces core values, enables democratic participation and rekindles commitment to personal and institutional integrity.

Our city, any community, is a set of systems constantly under construction governed by the choices and activities of individual and collective citizens. How can we help change the consciousness of our fellow citizens from seeing themselves as "objects" of city life, in a city which is an IT, to being "subjects" (I decide, I create, I connect, I think) within a city which is a WE. IWA helps gives individuals the experience of being part of a WE who act to create a positive future that otherwise would not exist."

All over the world communities are struggling to re-connect the body politically and give people the opportunity to contribute to something big and unifying. To create a sense of common purpose that inspires democratic participation requires a shift from single sector problem solving to focusing on what communities value and how to organize productive partnerships within which those values can be lived. We, as professionals, have been trained to think as competent experts with answers rather than as community partners with questions. Community partnerships make clear that we are vulnerable, don't have all the answers ourselves, and depend upon one another. Partnerships have not been the habit in our professional lives. So we need our confidence raised that partnerships can be collaborations, can accomplish more than we can accomplish on our own, in short, are worth running the risk of vulnerability because a greater

good can be accomplished. One concrete way to do that is to bring people into conversation with uncommon potential partners in a way that is natural and productive. This builds confidence that community may be possible and good for us and happen productively even with people who have been strangers. To say it another way, we need to discover that our learning communities are much bigger than we thought--that the stranger can become a friend.

What animates your hope? How can your hope inspire others to hope and to act? What will it take for many people to believe that we can create a just economy, a community in which no one is wasted, in which children are cared for and well educated, in which violence and addiction have lost their power to control? Are you willing to renounce cynicism and live out of a rich imagination for the flourishing of human life and community? Can you give up the luxuries and comfort zones in our lives in favor of a greater vision for human life? Are you keen to do justice, to open your ears and hearts to the cries of the most vulnerable and act in solidarity with them? **Hope is a choice not a feeling and every voice is important.** How can we build the friendships across difference which can restore balance, which can move toward justice, which will create a worthy future for our world?

I'd like to close with one last story of friendship bridging worlds and saving lives. In 2004, my sister Nelle who works for WHO in Washington told me something I knew nothing about – the shocking and needless death of mothers in developing countries. In this country, maternal mortality is mostly a thing of the past, even though it was common in our grandmother's generation. But in 2008, every minute of every day, a woman dies needlessly during pregnancy or childbirth, almost all in the developing world. Ten million women are lost in every generation -- mothers and sisters, daughters and grandmothers, wives and partners, friends and neighbors.

Huge disparities exist between rich and poor countries and between the rich and the poor in all countries. In Nigeria, for example, one in sixteen women will die during pregnancy or childbirth, compared to one in 4,800 in the United States. In the ten top-ranked countries on the UN's new list, however, fewer than one in 16,400 will die because guarantees of good-quality health and family planning services minimize women's lifetime risk. Almost 600,000 mothers and 4 million newborn babies die every year in the world from causes that are mainly preventable. Experts agree: with increased political will and adequate financial investment, most women and newborns can survive. In 2000, 189 countries of the United Nations adopted eight Millennium Development Goals for the year 2015. MDG #5, improving maternal health (with its targets of cutting maternal mortality ratios by 75 percent and achieving universal access to reproductive health by 2015), is called the heart of the MDGs, because if it fails, the other MDGs fail too.

When I heard about these statistics, Nelle and I began to dream of ways we could make a difference. I had a good friend in South Africa, a remarkable sculptor named Andries Botha whom I had met in Chicago when he was visiting here. I knew he worked with women in rural South Africa empowering their creativity and health. So I called and asked him how we might do something to get women involved in an imaginative way to save the lives of mothers dying in childbirth. He came up with a simple but very powerful idea—to gather women in sewing circles to share their stories of giving birth, add a midwife to the mix to educate them about safe

motherhood, and then have them create a beautiful garment depicting their birthing stories that could be used to raise awareness and mobilize support for preventing maternal death in childbirth. The idea was piloted the next month in a rural township outside Durban, and came to be known as Ubumama. Since then nine communities have participated and the project has captured the imagination of young women in this country who have reached out their hands in friendship as partners.

My hairdresser par excellence, Rochelle Prette, who is sitting at that front table, heard about Ubumama in 2006. Since then, she has refused to accept any payment for cutting my hair, cheerfully declining every time smiling when she is finished and saying “Ubumama”...give the money there. She sells Ubumama cards from her hair salon and tells the Ubumama story. Her generous commitment touches my heart every time I see her. Several years ago, a 20 year old summer intern for Imagine Chicago who had been my daughter Elizabeth’s roommate friend in high school, learned about the plight of mothers at risk and became passionate about furthering Ubumama’s goals. Kristin was captain of the Yale Women’s Ice Hockey Team for 2006-7 and determined to get her team involved in the Ubumama campaign. Together they created a pledge campaign with her team’s supporters pledging support for Ubumama on a goal-for-goal basis throughout the team’s season (total goals were 96!). The Yale Women’s Swim Team, inspired by their example, held a swimming marathon, with 30 team members swimming 160 laps each over 2 hours. The two teams raised over \$8000 in 2007 to support the women of Hamburg, South Africa to produce an Ubumama birthing gown sewn by HIV positive mothers and to provide educational workshops at a newly-opened local maternal health clinic on preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV. Her efforts won her last year’s prestigious national Hockey Humanitarian Award. But more impressive, after graduation, she turned down other job offers to devote herself fulltime to involving athletic teams at other universities, to enable many more countries where the risk of maternal death is high to participate in Ubumama. Three other universities this year are following her lead.

Rochelle and Kristin simply did what they could. It made a huge difference. And last year, my sister Carol who is also here today, joined hands and gave a benefit concert for Ubumama at her home on Mother’s Day. It raised \$12,000 for Ubumama to be extended to Nigeria, which is how Funmi Olopade got drawn into this campaign. Each one new participant in Ubumama joined hands with those across the ocean to hold mothers safe. This weekend I leave for Senegal, another country where mothers are at high risk. I know that today we could raise enough money for those mothers to be included in Ubumama to produce an Ubumama garment simply by your purchasing beautiful cards with Ubumama images that are available for sale in the lobby. It would be my great joy to bring those proceeds with me as an act of outreach from this group. (note: we raised \$2200 from IWA and friends that day!!!!!! And the project is now completed in Senegal!!)

I know that friendship makes the world safer and enriches my life immeasurably. I speak with my closest friend, Bon Gertz, a retired librarian and deep ecologist in South Africa, every day. We reflect on the hopes and struggles in our lives and world. We laugh and sigh. We dream and plan. We relish being able to do so for free across long distances because of the advent of Skype.

I believe that the energy of even one such friendship helps hold the world and bring it the world into balance.

Thank you all for making Chicago a city of friends.