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Take the Challenge:
I Dare You

“Mrs. Clark, I want you to know that your daughter has exemplified some of the most distinguished leadership qualities that I have ever seen in any of my students. She is destined to be a great leader one day, as her peers greatly look up to her and turn to her for guidance.” This was quoted from a “Note to Mom” letter my fifth grade teacher wrote. My mom cut this sentence out of my letter, enlarged it, laminated it, and saved it until this day. I am amused by the fact that my teacher saw me as a leader when I was only eleven years old. I guess it is true that there are a variety of leaders and an array of ways in which to lead. Apparently I had my own style of leadership, surely quite different from the present, even ten years ago.

As I reflect back on my college years and analyze my leadership skills, I am actually quite disappointed in myself. I believe that I am capable of being and portraying astonishing leadership qualities. Being that I came to this campus knowing no more than a handful of people, I was indeed intimidated especially with attempting to let my abilities shine. I joined a sorority and was immediately selected for an office. My sisters had obviously seen a sense of leadership in myself that I was unaware of exposing. As I became more and more comfortable with my environment, I slowly began to knowingly allow these attributes to peek through.

By the end of my first year at the University of Kentucky, I was organizing service events for my chapter weekly. It is difficult, in this day in age, to encourage college students to be actively involved with the community and/or campus. Initially, response was at a minimum. But, as time progressed, I slowly learned how to encourage these projects among the women. It

was a trial and error process that I, at times, became quite frustrated with. In the long run, the women have been more involved than many of the past years.

This was the spark that allowed me to recognize my leadership abilities even in such a large campus. However, very shortly there were fireworks. The Emerging Leader Institute was introduced into my life. I knew this was exactly what I needed to get my foot in the door in regards to serving and leading my campus and community. I spoke with many of my sisters who had previously been a member of the Emerging Leader Institute; all of who advised me that it was the best class they had taken throughout their entire college careers. I immediately submitted my application and impatiently awaited a hopeful acceptance letter! Thankfully, I was accepted into the program and looked forward to the orientation and classes the following semester.

Little did I know how much I would be rewarded in with my involvement in this class? I met some of the most interesting and intriguing people that I have ever and probably will ever meet during my life. The wisdom and words shared will be some that I will carry with me for eternity. Before I was introduced to these amazing individuals, I thought I knew what a leader was and envisioned myself as a leader as well. Needless to say, my skills were put to the test.

We were to construct an individual leadership project of which we worked on throughout the entire semester. The topic was left open, but recommended it to be something we are both interested in and passionate about. I was at a loss for something to do of which I was passionate about. My main passions in life revolved around family, faith, and friends. I dwelled and dwindled over what I could do to truly help other people and make a difference in someone's life. Ms. Dorothy Edwards came to speak to our class and made one of the most impacting speeches I have ever laid ears on. She encouraged and reiterated the fact that in order to have an

effective project we should get this “fire in our belly” rolling. This hit me harder and faster than reality ever has; my fire burns for my mother. I will devote my project to the honor of my mother.

My immediate thoughts went to the American Cancer Society. Being that my mother is the most courageous and tough cancer survivor I know, I will work with this organization to promote and support women dealing and coping with the detriments of cancer. This was definitely a project that my belly was burning for. I began volunteering with the organization weekly, still unaware as to what I could do for such a worthy organization. Finally, I decided that one of the biggest dilemmas with cancer patients is indeed their self-esteem. I knew that mother definitely underwent issues where she lost all sense of esteem and simply never felt the need to ever wear make-up or fix herself up ever again. This truly broke my heart, especially coming from my woman who, in the past, never left the house with a hair out of place. I knew there was an immense amount of women in the Lexington community who too felt the same way. This is where I was going to step in and take action.

My leadership abilities became clear to me through this process. In order to get the best response from me, my heart must be in it as well. Being that I was so passionate, it was not hard to communicate my passion to others, who to seemed appreciative. As I began to organize the project, I immediately learned why good leadership skills are necessary in such a task. My Personal Leadership Philosophy was building itself right before my eyes.

My theory of leadership is a diverse one indeed. I have definitely learned that leaders are not born, but made. If you have the willpower and drive, you can become an effective leader. However, if you do not believe in yourself or your project, do not expect others to. There is a

wide array of leaders and all types are needed in society in order to maximize results. I have learned there are five key points in the portrayal of exemplary leadership.

- *Model the Way*
- *Inspire A Shared Vision*
- *Challenge the Process*
- *Enable Others to Act*
- *Encourage the Heart*

I will carry these key points with me throughout all my leadership endeavors. I feel that I most correlate with that of *Inspire A Shared Vision* and *Encourage the Heart*. I know that I possess the leadership skills to carry these out to an utmost. I am a strong believer that if you simply impel others to understand how important an issue is to you, and they see this “fire in your belly” that is about something bigger than your own ambition, they too will want to be involved. They will fuel this fire and contribute their ability to make your vision a reality. Leadership is not about standing in front of a crowd delegating tasks and being “in charge.” True leadership is not based on position or rank. It is based on action, performance, ability, and effectiveness. We all relate to working for those people who were placed in leadership roles who did more to demoralize and destroy the business than anything else.

It is not true that all leaders are charismatic either. Many leaders are charismatic, but closer scrutiny shows that most leaders are not. Some of the world's most famous leaders had warts--some sort of shortcoming or personality issue. In a leadership role, people skills are very important--more important than technical skills. However, the best leaders are those who work toward a goal. Your cause, your purpose and your mission in life will make you charismatic, not the other way around.

Leadership is about the future, not the past. Joel Barker's has the best quote about leadership, "A leader is someone you would follow to a place you would not go to by yourself." Good leaders gain followers out of respect and their ability to cause people to work toward a particular goal or achieve a destination. People follow because they can relate to the vision or goal personalized by the leader. A good leader helps people become better than they are. A good leader creates a work environment that attracts, keeps and motivates its workforce.

Through my participation in this class, I have found something within myself that I feel I would not have found without my interactions in this class. I have established a relationship with a variety of organizations in the community that I would never have established without the support of ELI. I have traveled outside of my box to the most rewarding experiences throughout my college years. I am now the involved, passionate, committed leader that I have always wanted to me. I have set goals in my life to not only broaden but to strengthen my abilities in leadership positions. I have learned the importance of living up to what others expect, and not only talking about it, but also doing it. I am no longer scared to go out on a limb to do something different, I will now more likely engage in such behaviors actually. I have sparked this fire in my belly that I plan to let burn for the rest of my life, and challenge others to fuel it. I am dedicated to my visions not only as a student but also as a leader in an ever-changing society. I will not expect others to remember my name after I share my vision with them, but I do expect that they will remember my goals and embrace my legacy. If I can leave a positive influence on at least one person or organization in my lifetime as a leader, then I feel as if I have been a success as a leader.

Leadership is not a term to be used lightly. If you want to label yourself as a leader, then you must make the steps to allow for others to view you as a leader as well. One should set goals

to model the way to a more positive resulting future. You should plan to lead others to places they will not go without you there. Step out of your comfort zone and take a risk, though the results may not be as expected, I guarantee you will take something away from the experience. I challenge everyone to find the “fire in your belly” and act on it. Find that one thing that makes you want to jump out of your seat and talk about. Simply find it, decide what you can do to fuel that fire, and your leadership experiences will be more rewarding than you could have ever envisioned. Take the challenge; I dare you.