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Young Women Strong Leaders Conference

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• Good morning. It's my official role, and my pleasure to welcome you to Western Michigan University--and to a conference that I hope informs, inspires and celebrates the qualities that already make you strong leaders on your campuses.

• The role of a leader in our society is one associated with strength. But as management guru Peter Drucker once noted, "The task of leadership is to create an alignment of strengths, making weaknesses irrelevant."

• You will hear today from women--today's conference mentors--who have learned that lesson and who will tell you about their personal journeys and the mentors who inspired them along the way. I have enormous confidence in the quality of the observations you'll hear, because I have enormous confidence in the caliber of the women who lead on this campus and in this community.

• At about this time four years ago, I was a candidate for the leadership position at this University and I was meeting with a Presidential Search Advisory Committee that had been carefully and strategically built to represent the strengths of this University. I remember well the power of the impression the women leaders on that committee made and the message that was conveyed to me in meeting them. I knew that this was a campus that reflected my own values and recognized and rewarded leadership qualities wherever they existed.
• Later I found this community to be one that also celebrated and leveraged the strength of its women. Qualities like hard work, expertise, compassion and the ability to both listen and inspire people to come together to achieve a goal are the qualities that make any leader successful today, and they exist in abundance here in Kalamazoo--among women and men. I like to think that’s because this city has always prided itself in its commitment to education. It's the education city and one that has recognized the potential of its young people is its greatest asset.

• This is the home of the Kalamazoo Promise, which provides free college tuition to graduates of the Kalamazoo Public Schools. That wonderful gift, by the way, was secured from anonymous donors by one of this community's outstanding leaders, Dr. Janice Brown, who at the time was the superintendent of schools.

• Leaders in a highly educated community often succeed because of their ability to see and define the goal, or as Rosalyn Carter once pointed out:

"A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go but ought to be."

• I've been influenced by strong women throughout my career. They taught me the value of being able to both follow and lead, the necessity of listening before you speak and the profound value that comes from showing respect and compassion for others.
• But remember, too, that leadership is hard work. Real leaders don't ask those in their organizations to do something or be willing to work at a level they are not prepared to do themselves.

Indira Gandhi, granddaughter of Mahatma Gandhi, rose to serve nearly four full terms as the Prime Minister of the Republic of India between 1966 and 1984 (when she was assassinated). Born into the prominent Nehru family, she led in a male-dominated society by sheer will, hard work, and unquestionable ability. She once said.

"My grandfather once told me that there are two kinds of people: those who work and those who take the credit. He told me to try to be in the first group; there was less competition there."

I'm certain you'll hear similar messages from today's mentors. Enjoy yourselves, explore our campus, come back and visit again. I'll look forward to following your accomplishments in the future, as you become the leaders you want to be.

Thank you.