Feb. 4, 2020

Who Are You?

Good morning Upper School students, faculty and staff.

Here we are in February. I see February, and most things, through the lens of my own experiences, who I am.

Have you ever been asked, *Who you are*? This is a complicated question and my answer is one I frequently consider. As one new to Richmond and Collegiate, the art of answering who I am rests on my mental dashboard.

Oftentimes, we don’t know why we are asked or what people mean when they ask that question.
Identity is a fuzzy notion and a clarifying opportunity for us to think about our outside and inside composition. We are who we came from, and we are what we do and aspire to become. Capacity and character. We have the opportunity to consider who we will be in the future. Those who know my family know we spend a lot of time talking about families of origin and being careful about making judgements. As an educator, I view the most important part of my job to be making all feel welcome, known, valued and understood.

So, who am I? It is my hope that this share, this talk can help you get to know me and inspire you to think about each other in broader ways. To build community through dialogue and healthy risk taking — asking questions and listening for responses is a passion of mine and a part of who I am.

Recently, a panel of alumni spoke to the juniors. What I found myself thinking during their presentation is that each of you — no matter your next communities for living, learning or employment — will find yourself in spaces where opportunities to ask and answer who you are seem both opportune and daunting. This will happen often, if not daily upon graduation.

So back to February and who I am.

I was born and raised in New Orleans. February is usually the thrust of Carnival/Mardi Gras season, a culmination of art, culture and excessive partying. No matter one’s age, the word party connotes extreme and celebratory behavior. Imagine being a student with intense academics during a season of late-night parades and gatherings. Imagine being a student-athlete and artist with after-school commitments, rehearsals, practices and more without a reduction in expectations. This meant multiple asks for shifts in my schedule, putting more on my calendar, managing competing asks, in no thoughtful or specific order, and trying to maintain healthy habits of sleep and nutrition, despite a fairly gluttonous culture. Laissez le bon temps roulez. Do you all know what that means? Yes, let the good times roll. This is a mantra of sorts for all in New Orleans. Growing up in New Orleans shaped both who I am, and how others perceive me. My family is still rooted there in many ways, and although I graduated from a boarding school in Connecticut, New Orleans never left me. It is in my blood. I went to camp in Maine for eight summers with girls from around the United States and beyond. The campers and most of the counselors thought I spoke funny and tanned easily. They thought I was exotic and most presumed it was because I was from New Orleans.

Who are you, really? I am a wife. My husband, who some of you know as Coach Evins, was born and raised in Atlanta. He never lived outside of Georgia until we moved to New Orleans in 2005, the year during which most of this year’s freshman class was born. At that time, Coach Evins was 44 years old. At that point, he also changed blood types in some ways. New Orleans is now forever in his blood, too. New Orleans, for many, sticks to you, grows within you and becomes a part of your identity. Who are you? Now, when asked, Coach Evins even weaves New Orleans into his identity share.
Who are you? **I am a mother.** Our children, your classmates, and our four-legged child, Ansley, lived in New Orleans from 2005-2013. It was home for all of us during a pivotal time in our family’s growth and development, as well as the city’s identity. Yes, even cities are asked who and what they are. New Orleans was “letting the good times roll” so much that the reality of the city’s infrastructure and sustainability were brought front and center in August of 2005, when Hurricane Katrina and her aftermath took hold of the lives, culture, soul and attention of residents local and far away. In fact, Collegiate was one of many many independent and public schools who took in students suddenly evacuated and separated from their New Orleans schools as none of us could find our way back for months, years or perhaps ever again.

My children were tiny when Katrina hit. Sam was under 2 years old and June Friend under 3 months. We moved to New Orleans so that my husband could take on an Upper School headship and we could return to my hometown to raise our children. Who are you? **I was a stay-at-home mom for two years** and my husband served as an educational leader. It was a big identity moment for each of us. We took an opportunity, left his hometown of Atlanta and his alma mater where we both worked. A grown man becoming something new in a town that was not his own and a grown woman choosing to be a stay-at-home mom in her hometown; what would my rigorous alma maters think of this life choice? Little did we know what the future would bring. Visions of “instaperfect” family gatherings were dreamy. Hurricane Katrina had her own vision and our reality became something for which we felt most unprepared. Who you are will inevitably change as the world around you does the same.

So back to February. Because of my identity as a New Orleanian, I still think of Mardi Gras and that city an awful lot this time of year. The thoughts of king cake — the real deal, a delicious treat, The Neville Brothers, Irma Thomas’ local New Orleans music, family gatherings with the privilege of too much food and lots of air conditioning and the guests who always found their way to our home for such good times.

My mind is drawn to muggy Mardi Gras nights and days, and the feeling of live oak trees carrying the warm wind across my skin as I run in Audubon Park. I visualize the mix and range of neighborhoods, historic and oftentimes dilapidated architecture. I feel underfoot beloved cracked sidewalks, the ones I walked to school and local retailers upon, as did my children and husband years after my childhood.

I speak of the way New Orleans pushed me to balance who I am, who I want to be and the opposite ends of my identity.

Who are you? Where are you from? I was born and raised in a place where slow-as-molasses-in-January conversations with the known and unknown folks who walked on the same sidewalk as me to school each day. **I am a New Orleanian.** But long before I met Mr. Evins and left Atlanta, I left New Orleans for the first time when, as an 11th Grader, I catapulted to boarding school at Choate. There, I found myself
slipping down a snowy and steep hill, all by myself as a new student, in brand new snow boots trying to find my way to French class on the north side of campus. I tried to keep up and be on time. I quickly learned that everyone was smarter, faster and better than I was, or so it seemed. “Y’all” was foreignspeak and “you guys” was “normal.” The students, who were from many states and countries, thought (just like the kids at camp) that I tanned easily and spoke funny. I am actually grateful for feeling ordinary, the courage that being simultaneously average and odd amongst the exceptional taught me. Resilience comes from falling, failing and butterflies. Questioning who and what you are allows you to know yourself and embrace growth. And now, because of being the odd woman out, I am someone who sees brilliance and humanity in each member of our community and believe healthy competition means holding each other to our best not trying to beat each other.

I was once again asked who I am when I went to college. I attended undergraduate and graduate school in Virginia and remember bringing loads of friends home for Mardi Gras in February. My parents were going through a tough patch, which years later arrived at the end of their marriage. Nevertheless, we opened our home, made sure beds were made, food was abundant and all had safe places to stay during a fairly popular time to be in the Big Easy. My biggest memory from this hospitality was walking home after bringing my guests to an optimal parade spot, about 10 miles in the rain from downtown to our home because I had to study for an art history exam. Memorizing dates, images and themes did not come easily to me. I am a learning center kid. I was the one inside with resource teachers during recess. Flash cards, text book images and walking in circles making rhymes was also part of my February in New Orleans as a college student. They were doing the Mardi Gras Mambo and I was sealing Monet, Manet and Matisse into my memory. However, I made certain my guests had what they needed and were happy tourists with homespun comforts. I may be from the Big Easy, but I don’t take responsibility lightly. New Orleans promotes tourism, and hospitality is in my DNA but so is the importance of keeping one’s promise and living an intentional life.

So much more has transpired between Mardi Gras in the early 1990s and my life today, and all of it has led to this job, where a career in schools began as a guidance counselor, the first, an independent school in Knoxville ever had and now I hold the title of Head of School. The job is not so different. I try to help people and places. The name of my position changed, but the interests are pretty much the same.

We get caught up in labels. New Orleans, Connecticut, counselor, Head of School, stay-at-home mom, professional, single, learning center, married, athlete, artist, southerner, northerner, etc. etc. Who are you?

My role is a privileged one. I am asked to clear the way for growth and take the heat for what doesn’t go well. This is my seventh year as Head of School and I have spent over 20 years working in independent school administration. I am a mother, sister, wife, lover of nature, literature, cooking, art and physical activity. I am an at-work extrovert, introvert by nature and a person who gets nervous about being in front of large crowds.
I would much rather hide in the bathroom than give this talk, despite what seems really natural to the folks who have shared community with me.

What I now know, after years and years of being asked who you are is that people are always looking to know each other, feel connections and relate to each other. Some might choose to know one another in a negative capacity, by looking to label, judge and ostracize. Yet when we are our best selves, we are individuals seeking connection within community.

Just like you, I am a person. I am a flawed human being. I make mistakes. I have already done so on this stage. I have messy handwriting. I lose things. I am always late to meetings because I am a New Orleanian who stops and talks when walking. Siri dictation is something I rely upon and know she doesn't always hear my accent well. Many of you in this audience can rattle off my shortcomings with ease. My own children included. I still talk funny and I still tan easily. But I try to get things right and I think that's what matters. I try to manage and consider all sides of an argument and all perspectives in the room.

Growing up in The Big Easy, I wake up before the sun rises to move and stimulate my brain and focus on fitness. I am new to Collegiate, your School and yet want very much to make sure all of you feel known, seen, valued and understood here.

So on this day in February, a month where I eat some king cake, listen to the Mardi Gras Mambo and look toward the promise of spring, I thank you for the attention you have given me, the inspiration of the conversations I have enjoyed with you as students, colleagues and parents, and for the scheduled and unscheduled moments ahead to come to know you better. Please borrow Ansley from my office area and introduce yourselves to me. Stop by for a conversation about your hopes and dreams for Collegiate and beyond. Make eye contact and know when I speak with you it is because I want to know you better and build an even greater community by ensuring that our Collegiate lives and embraces our mission with intentional and shared efforts.

Our mission calls us to foster the intellectual, moral, emotional and physical development of each student. As such, who you are is more than enough; however, we need to know each other and not just label/presume we do. I thank you for listening and learning a bit more about who I am and hope it inspires each of you to share a bit more about who you are. Remember my charge at Convocation? I used the letters of Cougars. I asked you to courageously, observe, to understand and go as responsible citizens. I asked you to get to know each other and make ours a better world.

As such, let’s get to this big work together and once again, thank you for welcoming me on this day and the days prior.