

Always Remain Resilient

(Alumni Day 2021 Speech)

Life will sometimes feel like a never-ending fight. The punches, jabs, and hooks will come in the form of challenges, obstacles, and failures. Yet if you stay in the ring and learn from those past fights, at the end of each round, you'll still be standing.

Good afternoon, my name is Ayana Braxton-Thurston and Grymes gave me my first set of "boxing gloves". Now, you're probably wondering why I'm talking about fighting so much and it's been less than a minute, but I promise if you follow me throughout this, it will all make sense. My journey at Grymes wasn't typical, I came here in 6th grade with absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into. Let's walk through my first three days at Grymes.

The first part of my day goes by pretty smooth, but I do notice that I am being sent home with a tremendous amount of homework. We get to the last period of the day. Spanish. Senora Laub comes in and starts speaking in....Spanish. I have absolutely no idea what she is saying. I start looking around the classroom because at this point I'm sure that this is a joke.... It's not. Everyone begins opening their notebooks so I follow suit. They are taking notes so do

I.....Ayana Braxton.....September 1,
2007....Español.....Senora Laub.

By the end of class, I'm certain that Grymes is just not the school for me. Once I get home I am a complete mess. I'm talking full on crying with hyperventilation. My parents are offering solutions but at this point the only solution I'm entertaining is to return back to the local public school system in which I am familiar.

The next morning, my mom walks me back into Grymes and we have a meeting with Dr. Work to let her know about my first day and that this just may not be the right fit for me. Dr. Work is adamant that I should stay and although my mom is sure that I should stay as well, she tells Dr. Work that I am responsible enough to make my own decisions.

So needless to say, I went to Prospect Heights Middle School the following day and had an amazing time until I went to Pre-Algebra. The teacher gave the entire class a worksheet to complete and I finished mine first. After reviewing my worksheet, she accused me of cheating. I assured her that I had not cheated and that I already learned this coursework at Grymes two days prior. After that incident which was an attack on my character, I felt uneasy.

It's one thing to feel defeated academically but it's another when your ethics are being questioned.

So after ONE day at Prospect Heights, I went home and told my parents that I wanted to go back to Grymes and face the challenges that I tried to run away from.

As the late General Colin Powell once said, "There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from failure." So each day, I came home and worked hard to catch up to my peers. I made flashcards and studied them until I fell asleep. I conjugated verbs on the weekends. I learned and memorized concepts such as the alphabet in Spanish.

And by 7th grade year, I was placed in the advanced Spanish class here. I had a sense of pride after working hard and remaining resilient throughout my first year taking Spanish. The real irony of all of this is that in college I minored in Spanish and served as a Cultural Ambassador for international students specifically those from Spanish-speaking countries. Soooooo as you can tell I came a long way from my first day of Spanish at Grymes.

After I graduated from Grymes in 2010, I attended Orange County High School and was accepted into the Blue Ridge

Virtual Governor School program that they offered. As I began my courses there, I realized that Grymes had definitely given me the upper hand in public speaking, course work, and how to effectively communicate with my teachers.

Now, I'm sure at this point it has been a reoccurring theme to each of you that Grymes has prepared us all for High School but I am here to say that Grymes actually laid down the foundation for my entire life. Allow me to explain this briefly.

As my years at high school came to a close and I embarked on my journey as a first generation college student, it was Grymes that I had to thank for what I had become. When I started at VCU, I knew in order to get the best out of my experience that I had get involved. I quickly became a key leader on the campus which required skills that I know I wouldn't have possessed if it weren't for Grymes.

As time passed, I knew that I wanted to join a sorority but like many of the things I wanted to accomplish in life such as attending college, I would be the first to embark on it in my family. And although I come from a very supportive family, many of the barriers I broke came with struggles that I knew I had to face alone.

So after extensively researching all of the different councils and what each sorority represented, I decided to start attending events for Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated at the start of my Junior year. They made it clear at the first event that they wanted all prospective members to practice discretion throughout the entire process and that they were looking only for the best of the best. They wanted your grades, your leadership, and your community service to showcase that you were worthy of being a woman of Sigma. After that event, I knew that if I wanted to do this it was going to take focus and dedication. At the time, I was taking 20 credits that semester, working part-time, serving in multiple leadership capacities on campus, and interning with Congressman McEachin. So once again I used my boxing gloves that Grymes gave me and faced the challenge. It was a long junior year for me, there were nights where I would call my parents and my husband who was my boyfriend at the time and just cry. And there was absolutely nothing they could do to help me. However, much like my experience with Spanish at Grymes, I knew that if I continued to work hard and remained resilient that I would persevere.

On March 25, 2017 at 7:22pm, I became a member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated at a showcase in

which I revealed myself and announced the name in which I was given by my chapter – Opulent Resilience.

Not only did I successfully join my sorority, but I made straight A's that semester, continued to fulfill my duties in my leadership roles, internship and work. After accomplishing all of this and being given a line name of that significance, I knew that there was absolutely nothing that I would encounter in life that I wouldn't be able to achieve.

Let's fast forward again....after I graduated from VCU, it took me approximately a month to receive an offer at my current government job. I went through an extensive hiring process and wasn't sure if I was qualified or not because one requirement was to have 5 years of experience in which I had 0.

On my first day, my supervisor let me know that they favored me over the other candidates despite their level of experience because I was able to elaborate on multiple experiences that demonstrated my resiliency throughout my interviews. At that moment, I wanted to call Grymes, specifically Ms. Bost and thank her for teaching me the importance of being confident and strong whether it was in my speech at Declamation Day or a role in a play.

Now as many folks begin to retire within my department at work, my supervisor urged me once again earlier this year to apply to the Master of Public Administration program at Virginia Tech. He had been doing so since I started at my job, but I didn't find much interest in it. I already had enough on my plate with working full time, taking courses for my masters at Liberty online, and staying involved in my community. But at the beginning of this year, I decided to stop making excuses and apply. After I received my acceptance at the end of April, I began my courses in July. My courses have been much more writing intensive in this program, and it has certainly been challenging to balance everything. There are times when I feel like quitting, but I always remind myself that I am not a quitter and think back to my first day of Spanish at Grymes. I currently hold a 4.0 in the program and haven't had to pay one dime for my education at Virginia Tech.

I share all of this with you all to say, that you have been given the opportunity of a lifetime to have received an education from Grymes Memorial School. It doesn't matter if you've been here since Pre-K or 7th grade, you are guaranteed to have learned a valuable lesson that will stay with you for the rest of your life. That being said, I would like to leave you with a task as I close and you all get ready

for graduation this Spring. I want each of you to take time and reflect on one experience you've had at Grymes that has taught you something significant about yourself. I want you to really analyze that situation whether privately or with someone of your choosing and I want you to define that lesson in three words or less. After you've completed this, I want you to remember those words each time you encounter a challenge in life.

I want to thank all of the staff and faculty at Grymes for gifting me my first set of "boxing gloves". The skills I learned such as the one I learned in the boxing ring.....I mean Spanish class prepared me for experiences that I never could have endured without attending such a school as this. Happy Thanksgiving and Go Grizzlies!