

## **“I am” Versus “We Are!”**

**Presented by Patricia Stevens ('88 M E; '92 MS; '01 PhD)**

**Penn State College of Engineering Commencement**

**May 5, 2017**

Dean Elnashai, graduates, and guests thank you for the warm welcome and thank you for the opportunity to speak this evening. This is a wonderful honor.

Dean Elnashai, I've had the privilege of staying engaged with this college through four deans. Each one brought a different energy and left a personal impact. Dean Elnashai, as you move on, I want to thank you for your service to the College. We will miss your vision and charisma.

Class of 2017, CONGRATULATIONS! You each worked incredibly hard to achieve this milestone. I hope you had some fun too. Congratulations to the parents, grandparents, spouses, and children of graduates. Your support was invaluable. Finally, faculty and staff of Penn State, thank you for your dedication to the development of the next generation of engineering leaders. These graduates are outstanding.

This ceremony is an event for celebration and pride. Commencement is also a time for reflection and self-assessment. It is an opportunity to think about who you are, where you are going, and the impact your world view will have on your path toward success. Keeping that theme in mind, I'd like to tell you a story of a time when my world view was challenged.

One day a colleague of mine, Glenn, asked me how I felt about Stanford's motto "I am Stanford" in comparison to "We Are Penn State." Not being a follower of Stanford Athletics, I looked up the phrase and found that a few years ago Stanford ran an ad campaign in which they showed various Stanford students – world class athletes, scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs – followed proudly by the phrase "I am Stanford." Glenn's challenge was pointed. He noted that we usually hear "We Are!" chanted by 100,000 people all dressed in blue and white. He asserted that "We Are!" purports a willingness to be part of the crowd. "I am," on the other hand, professes a personal commitment to excellence. This was not a debate between the virtues of Penn State and Stanford. This was a debate of weltanschauung. Which world view, "I am" or "We Are!" puts you on a better path towards success?

Being a second generation Penn Stater who is a strong believer in the value of teams, I stood up to my friend. "'We Are!' does not imply a homogeneous group of people. Au contraire! 'We Are!' speaks of diversity. 'We Are!' portrays a commitment to community. And, oh by the way, Glenn, tell me a single accomplishment from your life that you achieved all on your own. 'There is no I in team' and if I have to pick one, I stand by 'We Are!'."

Glenn countered with a single, short question. He asked me to construct a sentence ending with "Patricia Stevens" and then he walked away. Graduates, you might try this with your own names. I found that "We are Patricia Stevens" just doesn't work.

Glenn's challenge inspired me to contemplate the two phrases: "I am" and "We Are!" and the impact of an "I am"-centric versus a "We Are!"-centric world view. I now have a renewed commitment to the power of "We Are!" I also have a newly found respect for the absolute necessity of "I Am." Most importantly, though, I think I see how the two concepts work together. I propose the metaphor of an automobile design. "We Are!" is the engine providing the power. "I am" is the traction between tires and the road. Without that traction, the engine makes a lot of noise but doesn't get you anywhere. On the other hand, without the engine, even the most highly engineered handling system is just a museum piece. My contemplations on this analogy provide some interesting insights that I want to share with you.

One of the first things that comes to my mind when I hear the word "we" is diversity. The benefits of diversity are well understood. Companies with truly diverse leadership teams are more successful. They are more likely to grow market share and to capture new markets. Similarly, diversity drives innovation. Consider, for example, product design that accommodates users with disabilities. Think about the OXO potato peeler designed for people with arthritis. Think about text messaging which was originally conceived to aid the deaf population. By using design methodologies rooted in empathy, the product design was improved for all users.

When it comes to an argument in support of the power of "We Are!" there is no denying diversity. But you will not have effective diversity without appreciation and respect for the experiences and perspectives of the individual. "I am" is the foundation of diversity. "We are" without distinct individuals is indeed a homogeneous mass. "We are" with commitment to individual perspective yields success.

The second thing that comes to mind when I think of the power of "We Are!" is the commitment to community and social justice. There is no greater example than THON. 16,500 student volunteers, \$147 million dollars raised, 3,700 families helped. Over \$10 million raised in 2017 alone. Community commitment at Penn State goes well beyond THON. Engineering Ambassadors visit schools to inspire the next generation of students. Engineers without Borders bring the power of the shovel and empowerment to local and international communities. Student tutors and mentors within organizations like the Women in Engineering Program help first and second year students succeed. The examples are countless. Whether it is focused on helping fellow students, local communities, global communities, or families impacted by childhood cancer, Penn State Engineers know the power of "We are!"

Another example comes from the story of the origins of the "We Are!" cheer itself. In 1946 when many college football teams were racially segregated, the Penn State football team included two black players, Wally Triplett and Denny Hoggard. The team was faced with a dilemma: They were scheduled to play University of Miami and back in 1946 Miami would not allow black players on the field. The coach put it to a team vote and the decision was unanimous. Penn State cancelled the game with Miami. Two years later in 1948, Penn State faced Southern Methodist University in the Cotton Bowl with Triplett on the roster. SMU requested a meeting to discuss dropping Triplett from roster. The Penn State response was

"We Are Penn State. There will be no meetings." Triplett scored the final touchdown in a game that ended in a 13-13 tie. Decades later the "We Are Penn State!" cheer came to be.

Where is the "I am" in this "We Are!" commitment to community and social justice? "I am" is the linkage to personal values.

"I am" is the critical statement when someone takes the mental leap from "*someone ought to do something*" to "*I am going to do something.*" It was there in 1972 when 78 students first said "I am willing to make a difference for kids with cancer." It was there in 1946 when a single anonymous voice went against social norms by shouting at the football team meeting, "We don't need Miami."

Ron Kelleher has a great quote: "Your values aren't your values unless they cost you something." Graduates, please make the investment in yourself to clearly identify your personal values. What are the few values for which you are willing to sacrifice? Stick to those values and you will live a life true to yourself. Add the power of the "We Are!" engine and you will bring large-scale, meaningful change.

One warning: Starting with your values is imperative. Imagine what happens if you have the momentum of "We Are!" without the stability and control of strong, personal values. You have a 1950s muscle car with bald tires on an icy day.

The third and final aspect of this optimal design metaphor starts with personal accountability. I challenge each of you to memorize the following statement, "I am accountable for my life and my choices." Not your parents, not your boss, not your friends. We are each accountable for our own career development, our choice of life partner, our choice of time spent at work or with family, and our choice of values. Claim your own life.

Once you accept accountability, then you should harness all of the power of "We Are!" to help achieve your goals. Use your network and mentors.

I have another favorite quote, this one from business philosopher Jim Rohn: "You are the average of the five people you spend most of your time with." These five people, whether family, friends or professional mentors will be critical in your ability to achieve your personal definition of success. They will reinforce your personal values and provide momentum in developing discipline. Pick them carefully. Think of these five as the turbo charger on your "We Are!" engine.

As I wrap up my comments, I will warn you that, like many engineering challenges, an optimal design based on the yin and yang of "I am" and "We Are!" is no easy task. It takes practice and courage to bring your unique perspective to a team and it takes patience to understand the unfamiliar perspective. It takes self-reflection and sacrifice to live by your values and leadership to influence others to do what you believe is right. Finally, accepting accountability and responsibility for your life is really hard. Choosing the right mentors and friends makes it easier

– and very rewarding. The good news is that you are all Penn State Engineers. You’ve proven that you can face a challenge and thrive!

I will conclude with one last thought: Graduates, I am overwhelmed with excitement about the careers you are beginning and the changes you will bring to our world. I am humbled by your accomplishments and potential. As I welcome each of you to the rank of alumni of The Pennsylvania State University College of Engineering, now more than ever, “I am” proud to say, “We Are!”