

GSSM President Inaugural Address - September 8, 2016

Good afternoon. Thank you, Dr. Davis, for your very kind introduction. Thank you, Honorable Senator Malloy, for your kind greetings. Thank you all for being here. Let me start by acknowledging the leadership of my predecessor, Dr. Murray Brockman, who over 15 years of dedication and hard work, with our campus community and state-wide partners, took GSSM to where it is today. My only wish is that my dad was here. He died one year ago, one month short of 97.

A little over a year ago, I visited Hartsville for the first time, to explore the area, visit the school, and to formally interview for the job. On a follow up visit, I flew in on a Sunday afternoon. No restaurants were open, except Yogi Bear honey fried chicken. I went in there, and although the chicken was yummy, I thought, hmmm, I really don't know about this place called GSSM. So let me share how the idea of being at GSSM took place in my mind, how it grew, how it took root to the point where the decision became comfortable, exciting, and, like all worthwhile endeavors, just a tad scary.

I went to school in Lima, Peru, to a bilingual, multicultural, parochial catholic school run by the Maryknoll order of Upstate New York. I had wonderful teachers, like we have here. I had wonderful schoolmates, like you students do. I was challenged beyond expectations, like you are. I remember, among other memories, spending half a semester just learning about orbitals; it was hard. I read Macbeth when I was twelve, and also poets like Pablo Neruda and Gabriela Mistral. I got to Anna Karenina, much, much later, and am still working on it. Smile ...This school reminds me so much of my dear Colegio Santa Rosa de Lima, and I would not be here today were it not for the love and challenge, for the excellence and opportunity my school provided. GSSM, which also enables excellence and opportunity, is now my home away from home, as Santa Rosa was for me, a wonderful stop on my own journey. Having been named after one Homeric hero, Hector the tamer of horses and defender of his beloved home Troy, another character from Homer's epic poems comes to mind, Ulysses, whose love of home and country and family summons all his courage and cunning and savvy so he can return to his home Ithaca, to his dear wife Penelope, his beloved dog Argos, his son Telemachus. GSSM is now part of my journey, and the beginning of the journey for all of you students. By the way, juniors, I am almost as scared as you are! By the way, seniors, I am almost as tired as you are! One day, students, you will come back to South Carolina and to GSSM, hopefully wiser, and paraphrasing a line from T.S. Eliot's Little Gidding, at the end of all your exploring, you will arrive where you started, and you will know the place for the first time.

I have been in higher education for about 30 years and the decision to serve GSSM involved a rather significant leap of faith, made easier by the care, passion and commitment from an exceptional group of faculty, staff, administrators, trustees, and most importantly, by the students and alumni I meet every day in the dining hall, school events, classes, and networking venues. Talking to Louis Tedeschi, a

junior, at lunch one day, I asked if he thought our classes were college level, and he replied “oh yeah”, with a nice, assured smile. A senior, Hunter Tate, came to talk about his passion for a photography club. His work and that of his fellow students will be showcased this coming weekend at the Powerfest festival in downtown Hartsville, sponsored by Duke Energy, a loyal GSSM supporter. Last April, two weeks before graduation, I attended a poetry reading by four seniors, two of whom - Marlana Kolesinska and Blaine Billings - are attending the Honors program at the College of Charleston. Erin Scott studies at Davidson College, and Emily Milz studies at USC. I am sure they will be published poets soon. Brennan Cain, a senior, is excited about designing an interactive map of our entire student body, and in the future, GSSM alumni. Lotta Keller, whose parents kindly agreed to join us today, won the President’s Cup last May. It is the most prestigious honor awarded by GSSM. She just started her freshman year at Yale, pursuing a double major in economics and political science. She has also been admitted to the most prestigious and competitive program for Yale freshmen, the Directed Studies program featuring, this semester alone, courses in literature, philosophy, history and political thought, led by some of the most notable faculty at Yale. Perhaps one day, we will be proud to address alumni such as Lotta as Ambassador Keller, or Secretary Keller, or maybe, President Keller.

How many other students like Lotta Keller, Brennan Cain, Hunter Tate, Louis Tedeschi and the rest of our excellent juniors and seniors, are out there waiting for the opportunity and the privilege to join GSSM? At a recent alumni reunion in Columbia I met Anna Clapper, class of 2010, who grew up in Marion County. Her mom, Pam Dellinger, teaches English in Dillon County. I am very much looking forward to partnering with Mrs. Dellinger and the schools in her area, to imagine how to create more, sustainable opportunities for children from under served school districts to come to GSSM. While we serve the entire state of South Carolina, what should we be doing in our home city of Hartsville and our own home county of Darlington, to renew and expand opportunities for our most gifted children? I am looking forward to working with our partners, in our county and throughout the state. I am grateful to the citizens of Hartsville for their warm welcome, the members of the General Assembly that I am starting to network with, for your support of the school, the many corporate partners who are eager to facilitate opportunities for our students, our University partners, the GSSM foundation, and our wonderful parents for your commitment and support.

GSSM is a beacon of academic excellence for the State, but as it evolves, it may also be redefining what it means to be a STEM school that prepares students for careers in science, engineering, and biomedicine, but can, with equal skill, prepare students for studies in, say, film and animation, computational finance, history of science, creative writing, and, most exciting, careers yet to be imagined. GSSM’s academic core includes the sciences and mathematics, but also humanities and arts, and music, and social sciences, enriching each other and inspiring our students for personal and professional excellence. This should not be a well-kept secret, but rather at the center of GSSM’s future brand and symbol.

GSSM is not only a home away from home for about 300 students in our flagship, residential program. It is also an extended academic home for about 120 students throughout the state in our Accelerate virtual engineering program, for over 1,300 science summer camp students also throughout the state, and over 1,700 alumni in the state and across the nation. GSSM is now a large, extended home, and a big family, and we keep growing. GSSM will be 30 years old in less than two years, and as it moves toward this milestone, should we perhaps not ask how these various faces of GSSM should become one single face, OUR face?

In its 28 years of existence, GSSM has gone through several eras. President Lee Cox guided the school through its first era, GSSM 1.0 (1998-2000), incubating and maturing on the Coker College campus, and developing the school's special character, born of a belief in developing confidence and mastery in a supportive community. In the second era, GSSM 2.0 (2001-2016), President Murray Brockman got the school its own campus, built full residential capacity, doubled enrollment, created the Accelerate program, and expanded outreach. And now, you have me, Hector, the tamer of horses. Are we ready for GSSM 3.0?

This morning, the board of trustees approved a charge, to me, and through me, to all of us, to engage in a process to imagine and implement the future of GSSM for the next 10 years. In a hyper connected, hyper- interdependent and hyper conflicted, but still hopeful and wondrous world, bold strategic thinking is a tall order for any institution, and it will be a tall order for us as well. Thomas Friedman, the NY Times columnist and author, has proposed that in an increasingly accelerating and competitive world, the most important competition is not between countries, or companies, or individuals, or worldviews, but rather between us and our own imagination. As I accept this opportunity to serve GSSM, let me challenge us to deploy the best of our communal imagination to serve the only non-negotiables on the table of our upcoming conversation: student-centered excellence and opportunity for all. The best dialogues, the best conversations, always start with questions, so let me ask questions, starting with the core of GSSM's identity as a place of learning.

For example, can we imagine a curriculum that has no peers in the state and in the nation? Can we imagine courses with no beginning and no end, with no textbooks and at the same time infinite libraries to draw from? Can we create a total GSSM experience that seamlessly blends the STEM disciplines with the humanities and social sciences, with the arts, with community service, with character building, with citizenship engagement of the highest order? Can we imagine our students publishing scientific papers before they start college? Can we nurture intellects that run as fast as anyone else's, and yet, at the end of the day, are able to engage with their solitude and their better angels, and apply that reflection to the next challenge? And yes, can we imagine overcoming our challenges with a good measure of joy? Can we weave the residential experience and the outreach programs into one strong, single fabric? Can we nurture engaged citizens rooted firmly in the best

values and traditions of South Carolina and who can, at the same time, acquire the cosmopolitanism and world wisdom to thrive anywhere? Can we deploy our collective humanity for those who have not been as fortunate as we have, and inspire children for whom currently there is little hope, by example and by sharing? Can we imagine a GSSM elementary school, where the first order of every day would be to give thanks and ask questions while learning how the world works with the same rigor as our GSSM high school, and the utmost fun and joy? Can we imagine our juniors and seniors and faculty inspiring and mentoring these children as they wake up to the world and its wonders? Can we imagine a multimillion-dollar fund that would enable our students to attend their most competitive college choice without undue financial burden on his/her family? Can we honor our privilege, and fully account for our responsibility? Can we imagine GSSM 3.0? Can we IMAGINE?

These are just some thoughts as we set forth into the future we will make, together. Anything and everything is open up for dialogue, with just one cautionary note. If Ulysses were alive today, the siren's voices he would likely hear would draw him with the allure and promise of technological innovation and novelty. Both are powerful forces in our world, and are certainly ones that should be pursued, but with wisdom, with purpose, with the strongest will and agency, as means to our clear ends, the non-negotiables of excellence and opportunity. With deep humility and gratitude for the privilege to serve this unique school, I invite us to imagine our future, not as the ineffable Yogi Berra would say, as "déjà vu all over again", but as something that only the GSSM family can dream up and make a reality. Let me just point out that Yogi Berra is not to be confused with Yogi Bear fried chicken. On a final, personal note, it is my hope that, years from now, when I am ready to pass the torch, I will do so by holding my Colegio Santa Rosa and my GSSM, in a wholly shared place, in my heart and in my memories. Thank you.

Hector E. Flores
GSSM President