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Character Celebration Keynote
John Winthrop Wright *Ethics in
Action Award*

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Amarantes Sea Cliff
New Haven, CT



First, thank you to the School for Ethical Education for this wonderful honor. John Winthrop Wright was a successful business man and a model of fine character. He lived by example and he practiced the principles of the Golden Rule – Do unto Others. His legacy continues here at the School, where you are providing programs and training to advance ethical behavior. Mr. Wright, through his philanthropy and vision has created a fine model for improving communities by developing sound citizens.

Thank you Mickey Herbert for your kind introduction and for nominating me to receive this special award. Your leadership is authentic and always in the best interest of the many constituencies you serve. You are a well regarded leader in the sports and health industries, and now an inspirational trailblazer at Bridgeport Regional Business Council. Thank you serving the greater Bridgeport community every day, we are lucky to have you.

Many thanks to my wonderful colleagues here this evening, members of the UWCFB board of directors, our executive staff and the leadership of Bridgeport Prospers. You are all an inspiration to me, modeling true collaborative community leadership. Your guidance and partnership make our organization strong. And a very special thank you to my husband Bob, who for almost 44 years has given me the courage, fresh brewed coffee and nutritionally balanced dinners to face life's challenges.

So, after I enjoyed a lovely lunch with School President David Wangaard and Trustee Peter Donovan, and the pleasantries of receiving this award were coming to a close, I was advised that I would be the keynote speaker this evening and was instructed to speak for about 20 minutes about being an ethical leader.

For those of you who know me well, you know I believe brevity is a virtue, and 20 minutes is about nineteen minutes longer than I can comfortably speak. Not to mention I had no idea how to approach a speech on such a lofty topic as ethics and being an ethical leader.

Around two weeks ago, as I was deep in thought and seriously worrying about this speech, I bumped into Marna Borgstrom, CEO of Yale New Haven Health System and last year's John Winthrop Wright award winner. Marna and I have the same standing appointment at our beauty shop every third Thursday evening. As we were catching-up, I shared with her my concern about addressing this audience. She told me she was sorry she couldn't be here, because her husband Eric was having knee surgery, but to sooth my fraying nerves, Marna offered to send me her speech. The next day, Marna sent her remarks with a cover email, which read: "Merle, great

seeing you last evening. And again, congratulations on the impending award. As promised, attached are the remarks I offered. I doubt anyone remembers anything I said.” Marna

As I was contemplating how to steal Marna’s remarks, David Wangaard sent me an email with this year’s award winning Laws of Life Essays and Academic Integrity PSA’s. Rather than work on my speech, I continued to procrastinate and began watching the PSA YouTube clips. It was nothing short of divine intervention, that I clicked on the link to Sofia Bara, Lauren Rivera and Jessica Wang’s PSA entitled “Stay Honest with Your Work” – it was a great PSA providing a good lesson about taking credit for someone else’s work product. I took this as a sign to rethink my plagiarism plan. I continued my viewing and absorbed the strong and important message of “School Morals” by Denisel Cerda, Jesmarie Hernandez, Karla Montoya, and Mahmood; followed by the powerful piece on “Integrity” by Veronica Bitz, Alexandra Halfinger and Nathan Dionne. I concluded that bootlegging Marna’s comments was not the way to go, particularly at an ethics event.

So to get me back on track, and guide me in my thinking on how to honestly address you, I turned to the universal expert of all things: Siri. Siri I queried, “What does it mean to be an ethical leader?”

Siri responded with a lot of suggestions. Some of her answers were extremely complicated which got me thinking again about how much easier it would be to doctor up Marna’s remarks, but Kiyona Turner’s essay caught my eye with its clever title “Stay Poppin with Perseverance”. I read it and was encouraged by her perseverance to play a role in the school play and dream big, I was inspired to press on myself.

So I refined my search. I told Siri I would be speaking to an audience that includes prize winning High School and College students who participated in a contest that since 2000, has had over 50,000 students take the challenge to reflect and write about values that help people live successful lives. Siri redirected me to The School for Ethical Education website where I reviewed last year’s winning submissions. But it was then I realized I had all the inspiration I needed right in front of me. I had this year’s prize winning essays that David emailed earlier.

I hunkered down and read the beautiful stories about personal values, beliefs, struggles and success; about families, peers and schools. I was moved how Laurie Bernard persisted and recognized the privilege of education, how Halia Butkiewicz muscled through trauma with family love. I read Tristin Dapsis’s account of a life altering accident and was impressed by his perseverance. I was moved by Alicia Erami’s chilling telling of discrimination and the values of respect. I was motivated by Stella Formato’s sports journey and never giving up, and Orrin Pierce’s love of learning and the value of reading. I was touched by Bianca Plachi’s testament to living life with gratitude, Saimin Shamim’s struggle with her dad’s passing focusing on staying positive and Isabella Warren’s sharing of warmth and generosity through giving of time and treasure. Thank you and congratulations to all of you for your powerful messages – you have already impacted a life – mine.

You kept me from giving someone else’s speech and helped me figure out how to tell my own story.

I don't think my story is any more compelling than any of yours. But it is 50 years longer. I have had a lot of careers, I practiced law, served as a Hearing Officer for the State of CT, been General Counsel to a bank and an international asset management firm, worked for a municipality and a couple of nonprofits. For the past 16 years have been the CEO of the UWCFC.

All of my experiences have been of value and taught me life's many lessons. If I were to re-live my life, I would probably make most of the same choices all over again. I might however eliminate the tattoo and stick on eyelashes, but the big decisions, including going to Woodstock, were good ones. If you were to ask me what experiences were the most important for learning and shaping my character, I would say the most painful ones. Not unlike the character shaping stories celebrated this evening the tough choices and difficult obstacles build the strongest muscle.

So what does being an ethical leader mean to me? Certainly, I try to be honest, compassionate and loyal. I don't steal or intentionally hurt people. I try to do the "right thing", but my "right thing" is not necessarily the universal "right thing". There are a lot of nuances in discovering the "right thing."

As a Hearing Officer for the Commission for Human Rights and Opportunities I heard allegations of discrimination from people who felt they were being treated unfairly because of race, sexual orientation, ethnicity or a disability. The institutions defending these claims, often times spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in lawyers' fees. Nothing is worse than feeling you are being treated unfairly, the topic of Alicia's essay. But conversely, nothing is worse for a company, which is also populated by human beings, than to be called a racist, or sexist or a hater of any variety.

It was my job, as a Hearing Officer, to figure out a just conclusion. By watching the pain on both sides, I learned that depending on your circumstances, your upbringing, your culture, your beliefs, your own moral code – each of us sees things differently, through our own lens. The "right thing" is not always a clear shot.

My idea of being fair, is based upon everything that makes me – me, where I grew up, my parents, where I live now, my friends, my education, my jobs. All of these factors influence my judgement. As a Hearing Officer, I weighed the evidence and applied the law. I thought my decisions were right. But they were only right in the eyes of one of the two parties. The losing party in a lawsuit feels wronged all over again. I learned that my doing the "right thing" is right through my lens of justice, but not everyone sees the world they way I do. So I have struggled over the years about what it means to be fair.

I heard many times from my own kids that I wasn't fair, that I was favoring one child over the other. How many of you have said mom or grandma, or your uncle, or friend likes your brother or sister better than you? Well, I have two very different children, each one needed and still needs – even though they are grown up and have their own children - different things to be successful. Why would I buy glasses for both kids when only one needed them? Why would I get

braces for both kids if one had straight teeth? Rather than being “fair” or treating my kids *equally*, my moral compass dictates I be *equitable* and give each child what he or she needs to be successful.

Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full healthy lives. Being *equitable* does not mean treating people *equally*. *Equality* ensures that everyone gets the same things, whether they need them or not. Like *equity*, *equality* aims to promote fairness and justice, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things. Not everyone needs glasses or braces. Different people have vastly different needs and this is the world we live in. Rising inequality is the most pressing issue of our age.

So I have taken my moral compass, and my learning over the years and apply it to my work at the UW, where we try to do the “right thing” by helping people achieve their full potential. That doesn’t mean we split our precious resources *equally* among the areas we serve, or all the programs and organizations in Coastal Fairfield County. It doesn’t mean we divide our support *equally* among all the people who live in our region.

Rather, we strive to be *equitable*. We recognize some folks come from a place of privilege and others from a place of despair. Our work at UW is to level the playing field so *everyone* has a chance to succeed. We are trying to change the odds for those who have had the odds stacked against them. We know that not all children start at the same place, many need more and different support to catch up to their peers, we apply our resources *equitably*.

Our board, staff and Bridgeport Prospers community leaders, many here tonight, are shaping the UW into an institution for the greater good by being in the forefront of creating *equitable* solutions. We are working to find new ways to change situations that are unfair and avoidable. We are striving to ensure that we as community leaders and the institution we are molding, lives up to standards that are moral and solidly based.

I certainly am not the individual recipient of this incredible award. This award is a testament to all those working in our community who share these principles. Benjamin Franklin said: “Justice will not be served until those who are unaffected are as outraged as those who are.”

I thank those I serve for their trust and sharing these values and for giving their time and talent to fight for the dignity and rights of others.

But let me circle back to Marna Borgstrom’s speech that I did not steal. Marna, a truly great leader, ended her speech last year with a quote from Mark Twain, who once said “Always do what is right. It will impress half the people and astound the rest.” I will let Marna know next Thursday evening at the beauty salon that I read her concluding remarks and I bet people will remember them.

My congratulations to the awe inspiring student winners, I trust you will astound the world and thank you again to the School for Ethical Education for this wonderful award. I am deeply humbled.