

Presidential Address before the 51st Pi Kappa Delta Convention
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Two years ago, almost to the day, in this banquet, about right over there... sat a young student of mine named Ali. If you recall, Dr. Tomeka Robinson, invited people in that vast banquet hall to stand up and shout out how they were going to use their voice. Some of the responses expressed hurt, some expressed passion, some expressed the desire for social change, some were angry, and some were incredibly conciliatory. That address ended. We gave out some trophies and celebrated your accomplishments. On the long van ride home, my team stopped for gas and as they unloaded I noticed Ali in tears. Of course being the kind and compassionate guy I am, I asked her what was wrong – her answer stopped me...

She shared that she had been thinking about almost nothing else other than the words and tone that were expressed in those moments at the banquet. Ali, a very traditional, white, middle class, Christian attending a relatively conservative school, was broken hearted by her lack of knowledge about things beyond her realm of experience. Two years later she is working in Denver for the Colorado Immigrant Rights Coalition and leading discussions amongst people very different from herself.

That banquet for Ali began a journey of figuring out how to more constructively engage the tough issues of our time. It also began a journey for me.

Shortly after the PKD tournament I took a job in California – and on the day I moved into my office, there was a tragedy that happened in Charlottesville, Virginia where hate took a life. My university president happened by my office to welcome me to campus, and proceeded to sit down and shared that he was deeply moved by had happened and knew that our university needed to respond but he didn't know how. He admitted that he may not have had the words. During our talk I was able to mention a book, "Confident Pluralism" where the author, John Inazu, a professor at Washington University law school describes ways to survive and thrive in division and difference. We invited John to campus to begin our year and during the next 12 months I was tasked with helping to equip diverse populations in their approach to issues that typically divide us. We had racial issues to deal with. We had gender issues to deal with. We had political issues to deal with. The series became known as "Conversations from the Messy Middle". This job took me down roads I had never traveled, or I thought I had traveled but didn't really understand. One note – the relationship with PKD and the Theatre for Public Policy improv group brought our series to a conclusion with just the right mix of issues and humor.

In the last couple summers our PKD National Council has tried to address the tough issues related to access, safe places to constructively engage, and various approaches to the hot political issues that surround us. We talked about DACA and how we should respond. We talked about gender based laws in certain states that might impact our organization.

This past fall, the Christian university I work for was confronted with a major LGBTQ+ issue and as the advisor for the newspaper, the student news outlet was ready to break the story and I knew it would make for some tough conversations on and off campus. I asked if it was accurate and if they had attempted to contact all the involved administrators and board members. They had. Hit the publish button. Over the next two days, a publication that usually gets about 500 views per news story had over 50,000 including follow-ups from the LA Times and MSNBC. That one story required that a constructive dialog occur about how to deal with the complexities and ideas around balancing a variety of perspectives on a potentially explosive topic.

Hop into today. Two years ago we shared how we were going to use our voices. I am hoping that each of you, and PKD as a whole, will move to the next step and help others engage constructively in conversations around tough topics. We are uniquely positioned to help our campuses by facilitating positive and productive events that will allow a variety of voices to move us toward deeper understandings and much less divisive rhetoric.

During the next couple years PKD will be implementing a new Strategic Plan to cover the next ten years. It will include things like better financial foundations and growing partnerships with funding organizations to help keep your tournament and organizational costs to a minimum. It will include things like even better vision for how our organization can engage in the larger cultural discussions. It will include, how member care can be done even better – so that we are supporting and encouraging chapters and members at many levels. We need to know when programs are on the chopping block and we can help to defend them. We need to know when specific members or member groups are being challenged or oppressed so that we can speak into that when appropriate. We need to know how to care for our chapters and beyond by partnering with them to advance our shared mission. Understand that a Strategic Plan might be the responsibility of the National Council – it will be up to you, each of you to keep your eyes and ears out for ways that we can serve as an organization. You are at the local tournaments. You are sitting in rounds with students from other schools. You are grabbing a quick snack and conversation in a coaches lounge at a regional tournament. You are on the ground and only you can help us know what needs to be addressed.

This is a time of deep division but can be a time of constructive words.

This is a time of individual hurt but can be a time of collective healing.

This is a time of damaging rhetoric, but can be a time of celebrating the art of persuasion, beautiful and just.

Regardless of what is thrown at us it is the perfect time for Pi Kappa Delta