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Simmons Leadership Conference Recap

The Conference

The Simmons leadership conference looked a lot different this year. There wasn't the usual extravagance of a conference this size. Instead, COVID-19 turned this year's Simmons Leadership Conference into an intimate evening of women empowerment. Conference rooms were replaced with living room couches and stages replaced by laptop screens. There wasn't any running from break out session to break out session; simply an easy-going round table of actresses, journalists, athletes, and influential business leaders.

So why host the leadership conference? We're in the middle of a global pandemic and conferences across the country were canceled or postponed. Susan Mackenty Brady, one of the hosts sums it up perfectly: "this event, 41 years now, has stood for hope, it's stood for inspiration, it's a beacon of light."

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While there were so many valuable and important gems given from each speaker, here are our most important takeaways from the main stage.

The Keynotes

Dambisa Moyo

The first keynote was Dr. Dambisa Moyo, a renowned economist and author. She provided a timely and relevant review of the state of our economy and the impacts of COVID-19. The picture was bleak, but the good news is that she believes that companies will bounce back. "Go read history you'll find that yes, this is a deeply discouraging time, but the world has survived so many other challenges from the bubonic plague, to the great depression, to the world wars. I think that's important framing," she says.

Companies are adapting and stories of companies being good corporate citizens are numerous. From Walmart turning parking lots into COVID-19 testing center to hotels providing rooms for front-line workers, our penchant for helping our neighbor prevails even though companies may be in survival mode.

Ending her talk with a call to action, Dr. Moyo says, "my job is not to lay out for you a laundry list of trauma. It's to remind you that people are depending on us and it is absolutely critical that we step up and continue to shine and come with solutions."

Pat Mitchell

Emmy winner Pat Mitchell talked about becoming a dangerous woman, which she defines as a woman ready to speak out against injustice everywhere we witness it, standing up for equality across every sector of life, working to break the silence of violence and abuse, and being willing to take the risks that create change and opportunity. She talked about equality for women and people of color and the barriers to access that are still ever-present in the 21st century and doing away with the scarcity mentality that leads us to believe that there's not enough room at the top for all of us. "We need more women leaders. I do believe women are more likely to be transformational, risk-taking, opportunity-creating leaders," says Mitchell.

She guided her talk with several questions for the audience. Questions that as leaders and future leaders are important to ponder:

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Do you believe in the value of an equal rights amendment in our country's constitution?

Have you ever encountered challenges as a leader when attempting to implement inclusive hiring or promotions?

How do you feel about power?

Do you believe that women use power differently or that men and women address problem-solving differently?

Her rallying cry was that as women we can't lead from the sidelines we have to engage if we're to achieve parity.

Muffet McGraw

Muffet McGraw, former Head Women's Basketball Coach at Notre Dame, started her talk with some disappointing statistics. Women earn more than 56% of college degrees, including more doctorates and master's than men. Women are 50% of the population in the US and yet, we have barely 50% representation in congress and a stunning 5% of CEOs in fortune 500 companies.

During her talk, she examined the question why don't we have more women in leadership positions? While she doesn't have a definitive answer, she has some interesting observations. Women are simply lacking the confidence that seems to come naturally to men.

Confidence is one of the qualities she wishes she could see more of in her players. What if I fail? Am I ready? What if I'm not good enough? She believes that these are the questions women ask themselves that cause them to hesitate when given an opportunity. "Making mistakes is something women have to get comfortable with. Why do we think we have to have everything exactly perfect before we make a decision," say McGraw.

She contends that women need to take more risks and care less about what other people think. She noted that men seem to be naturally confident and don't mind taking credit for their accomplishments. Lastly, she talks about the double standard that women are held to when they show personality traits like competitiveness and drive versus when a man displays them.

Her speech could be summed up by one powerful quote: "This isn't the senior prom. Stop waiting to be asked. We don't need permission."

Serena Williams

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In a structured Q&A session led by Muffer McGraw, tennis giant Serena Williams doubles down on McGraw's point about double standards, especially for women in sports. She talks about her well-reported "meltdown" on the tennis court and how this compared to behavior from her male counterparts, who were judged much less harshly than her. She emphasized the conditioning of girls and boys from childhood which seeks to box women in girls into certain pursuits and steer them away from others. "Certain battles build your character and some battles aren't necessary," Williams says. She talked a lot about the women who paved the way in tennis and made her path easier to forge. "There always has to be a pioneer. The one who sticks her neck out to open other doors," she says. Lastly, when asked about how she defined success she contends that she defines success by how she feels on the inside versus the things that she's accomplished.

Signature Session Speakers

Yeonmi Park

Yeonmi Park gave a harrowing account of her journey to freedom. Setting the stage with a background of her childhood in North Korea, she talked about coming face to face with starvation, her family's dangerous escape to China and later South Korea, and the absence of freedoms that the rest of the world often takes for granted.

One particular anecdote she gives highlights the distinction between her experiences and most of the world. She tells the story of when she escaped to South Korea and she saw a fundraising event on television and the people were very upset, even weeping. She was shocked to find out that it was a program for animal rights. "I didn't know I had rights as a human; in this part of the world animals have rights," says Park.

She wraps up her speech by cautioning us that freedoms are fragile and need to be protected and by urging the audience to stand up for the rights and freedom for those who don't have any.

Sonia Manzano

Sonia Manzano's speech reflected on her trials growing up without means in an abusive household in the South Bronx, struggling academically, and overcoming it all to become an Emmy-winning actress on Sesame Street. She gave an anecdote about her making a suggestion on the set of Sesame Street to add more fruits to the fruit cart that would be present in a diverse community of color to make the

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show more accurate. When her suggestion was implemented she realized that we all have a little bit of power, even if it doesn't seem like it, we just have to find it and use it. She also outlined her three tips for success:

- When in doubt ask for help
- Identify where the power lies
- People hire you to solve their problems not to cause them problems

The Panels

The two business panels were a wealth of knowledge and advice from women who have managed to climb the corporate ladder and become leaders in their respective industries. The topic of both business panels was power and how it can be used positively. To learn more about the panelist [visit the Simmons Leadership Conference's website](#).

Some of their most compelling thoughts on power:

- Power is a positive attribute that we all have.
- Ask yourself how you can empower and help the people around you to be successful.
- Power is having the ability to influence.
- Power is guided by three values: credibility, authenticity, and empathy.
- Power does not come from a title or position but from being an authentic leader.
- Power in the workplace comes from a reputation of credibility and reliability.
- Power and authenticity are not mutually exclusive.

The conference had so many compelling stories, dialogues, and pieces of wisdom about challenges and solutions for leading as a woman and how to use power positively to lead your teams to success and help other women. While the virtual format was a very different experience for those who have attended this conference in the past, it was just as powerful, relevant and empowering.

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