

IMSA's 25th Birthday  Opening Day Commemorative Celebration  7 September
2011

Invited Remarks by Stephanie Pace Marshall, Ph.D.

Thank you, Britta. Good Morning. And Happy Birthday to us! It is a joy to celebrate this milestone. Tom (Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner), thank you for being here. Britta (Britta McKenna, part-time IMSA25 Director of Special Events) titled my comments, "Recollections," and I have many! This was a day many thought might never come. And it was a day some (who shall remain nameless) even hoped would never come, but that's a long story for another time. Today, we celebrate.

It's impossible for me to capture in four minutes what I'd really like to say—since most of you—came to an IMSA that was already established, credentialed, and recognized. You came to a place that already had significant BRAND reputation for integrity, seriousness of purpose, student research and inquiry, imagination, developing creative STEM potential and talent, and nurturing "decidedly different" ways of thinking and habits of mind—and you came to a place with a recognized MO JO for being bold, curious, skeptical, pioneering, slightly irreverent, and a bit quirky.

This reputation and recognition were achieved the hard way—we earned it and thanks to you, we continue to do so, each and every day. It was not this way when we opened on September 7, 1986—and 210 students, 12 teachers, and 7 RC's came from across the nation and Illinois to what the media called "A Bold Experiment in Illinois Education." We opened one year ahead of schedule—another long story.

So when students came, they weren't sure where they were going to sleep, if the beds and mattresses had arrived, or if their desks were assembled (they were the night before). They didn't know what the curriculum or program of studies would be because we didn't have one. They weren't sure if they'd have computers or books in the library—not to worry—they didn't. They didn't know that when the first extended weekend came that we all held our breath, wondering if they'd come back—and even checked their rooms to see if they had left everything! Their parents didn't know if the colleges would accept them with an IMSA transcript—an unknown institution—that didn't have class rank or GPAs—pretty radical in 1986. They didn't know that a year-and-a-half later when funding was in serious doubt, IMSA might close—December 31, 1987. And they didn't know we'd pack them up on yellow school buses and set-up classes in the State Capitol Rotunda so legislators and the media could see what IMSA was and understand what Illinois would lose, if we closed. But these are all long stories.

They may not seem relevant today, but they are some of our root narratives and identity stories and they have shaped who we are today. They remind us of sacrifice and courage. They remind us of how far we've come. They remind us that we stand on the shoulders of IMSA pioneers, and they remind us of what we've inherited and the legacy we are privileged to keep alive and thriving.

So, why did they give-up safety and take some pretty big risks to come to this bold experiment in Illinois education? It may be for some of the same reasons you did. Belief in the transformative power of the IMSA idea—that by design, we could create a vibrant learning and teaching laboratory that would nurture STEM talent and potential, enable students and staff to flourish, discover what they love, and achieve extraordinary purpose. We also believed that creating and modeling the “IMSA Design” and teaching “the IMSA way” would be catalysts to stimulate excellence across our state and nation.

The words of our Mission Statement have changed over 25 years, but the roots and commitments have not because the power of the IMSA idea, first express by our Founder, Dr. Leon Lederman, remains and it is reflected in the words of Dr. Carl Sagan, “The Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy is a gift from the State of Illinois to the human future.” I believe he is right.

So I close with an invitation because I knew I’d run out-of-time. I created a WORDLE (you see it projected on the screen). It’s a WORD CLOUD of what IMSA25 means to me and I invite you to make one of your own. We can share them on CoolHub and create the IMSA25 WORDLE WALL. What might your IMSA25 WORDLE “look like”?

I close with a question, “What does this time require of us now?” because those who are here celebrating IMSA’s 50th birthday will be the benefactors of how we answer. HAPPY BIRTHDAY!