This speech was offered by Elisabeth Smela, Professor of Mechanical Engineering, when accepting the Woman of Influence Award at the President’s Commission on Women event, March 27, 2019.

Woman of Influence 2019 Acceptance Speech
Elisabeth Smela, Professor of Mechanical Engineering
A. James Clark School of Engineering

Spring flowers blooming – Celebration of Women. Glorious colleagues! This is a cliché said in all speeches, but it is profoundly true – I am deeply humbled to be included in the group of women who have received this award. They are heroines. And I am profoundly grateful to the colleagues who submitted my nomination, whose generosity is boundless.

PhD era: Luz Martinez Miranda, Heroine of mine. When I was a timid young PhD student (one of only two women students in the department at that time), I was extremely fortunate in my advisors. I doubted my ability to complete the doctorate, but she said, when you don’t believe in yourself, trust those who do believe in you. I will echo those words of wisdom, and add, when you don’t believe in yourself, just keep putting one foot in front of the other anyway. (Being stubborn has a lot to be said for it.) Eventually, you will see how far you’ve come and you will start to accept that you belong there. Eventually you will achieve enough to convince even yourself.

In the beginning, an insurmountable wall – One woman makes it. When I started at Maryland in 2000, there were 15 female professors in Engineering, 2 of whom were full professors, and one of those was the newly promoted Lourdes Salamanca Riba. It is so important to have the proof of concept established. Linda Schmidt was the pioneer in Mechanical Engineering, the first woman to get tenure in the department, for which she will be recognized tomorrow at the First to Advance Celebration. After we (she, the department) achieved that, it was clear that it was now possible. Then there were two of us with tenure, and it started to feel probable. Then there were three, and it finally became ordinary.

Gathering yearly, we group of damaged women, conveying wisdom. In those early days, the women professors met once or twice a year over lunch, which was so important for me. Besides being fun, it was a safe space and a reality check, a group that “got” it when you started to wonder if you were the problem. It was also a source of great advice. Sandra Greer reminded us, you can have it all, just not all at once. Deborah Goodings explained, “We are damaged people” because of what it took them to get here. We learned how some efforts, such as getting daycare on campus, were multi-generational and exhausting, so the baton needs to be passed on to the next, fresher wave.

A summer package with care and anxiety submitted to friends. Reflecting back on my time at Maryland – I received support from the very beginning from all my department colleagues. I am so grateful to so many – Miao, Hugh, Pamela, Reza, Carol, David, Dave, Bala, Sheryl, Ed, Pat, George, Darryll – so many – some gone and others still here. Not many people can say they enjoyed the tenure process, but that is when I realized how many friends I actually had, how people were working on my behalf.
Science seminar: Exciting work from outside, Roomful of smiling. It’s so important to work in a place where people are nice, where you look forward to meeting your colleagues, where people greet each other in the hallways. I have been in places where that’s not true.

Semester begins – Our known and unknown allies work toward progress. Beyond people being friendly, I have found that my colleagues generally do the right thing. Among my fondest memories is working on the University Senate and Senate Executive Committee, so skillfully led by Elise Miller Hooks. Together with Sally Koblinsky and Ellin Scholnick, we worked on policies to make the university a place where more people could thrive. We don’t always know about quiet pockets of support. When asked about granting automatic classroom teaching relief upon the birth or adoption of a child, the response of 4 engineering department chairs was “It’s a no-brainer.” Engineering was a leader on women’s issues, and continues to be.

A cold wind blowing, but warm lights shine steadily, showing us the way. Underneath everything we accomplish are the kind and the fierce people in the background who light up our days and buck up our courage. I’m thinking of the Terrys, Rosemarys, and Susans who staunchly defend those without a voice in the room, the Litas and Pennys who take care of us with such warmth, the Melvins who are by our side in a crisis, the Jelenas and KerryAnns who make it look easy. They add immeasurable sweetness to our days and keep us on the straight and narrow.

Upcoming decades, so much still to undertake, paying it forward. Nevertheless, there is still a lot to be done. We need to keep our arms linked in support of each other, and our hands extended to those who follow us. The only way to honor the giants on whose shoulders we stand is to simultaneously break our heads smashing the next glass ceilings, and to make sure that we support others in following the sometimes complicated trails as they are blazed. Perhaps we also need to cut ourselves some slack. It can take a lot just to still be there.

Impressive robotics! A female professor’s talk. “What is the big deal?” One of the things that makes me hopeful is the fact that quite a few in the younger generation take our accomplishments for granted. Not only that, but they won’t give way on balancing their lives and families with their jobs. Their confidence, even cockiness sometimes, makes me laugh (in a good way). This glimpse into a possible future gives me optimism.

Spring flowers blooming. Celebration of Women - Glorious colleagues! Returning to where I started, somehow, amazingly courageous, energetic, warm-hearted, brilliant people take on leadership and inspire us to join them. This event is a wonderful celebration of some of those in our community who have made a difference, and it is a great joy to be here among all of you today.