

Thank you, Kaitlyn, for the introduction, and a special thank you to the program organizers for inviting me to speak today

Have you ever had an idea?

Maybe you wanted to go somewhere, wanted to something, and didn't quite have a plan for it yet. As people, we cannot help ourselves but to create more ideas than we can handle. But occasionally, there is an idea that keeps coming back.

Think of an idea like a seed—for it to thrive, you have to create an environment that will encourage the seed to germinate. Most importantly, you must accept that there is a possibility that the seed might not sprout—the idea might not become anything more. But if you believe in it, you need to acknowledge, but not obsess over the possibility of failure and move forward. And Trust me, this is coming from a chronic overthinker.

But, We owe it to ourselves to take that idea –that seed of interest– and nurture it so that it can grow.

Four score years ago, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had a Dream, but before he shared that dream with the world, it was an idea in his head. This idea of racial equality was shared by oppressed communities that looked like Dr. King. But most people thought that that racial equality was an unattainable goal for the U.S. However, because he believed in that right to be treated as a human, he persisted no matter what.

The theme of today's celebration is "Action through Education and Community Engagement." To explain what that means to me, I am going to tell you a story about a seed of an idea that I had, and how I was able to take action, through my education and by engaging with my community.

Last fall, I had the opportunity to create a service project that benefits the youth. This was through my service fraternity, Alpha Phi Omega, which offers grants for the service projects. As it happens, my idea – or spark of interest-starts with an actual seed, sort of. As a child, I desperately wanted to grow something but did not have the space and finances to do it. So, my idea was to provide a space for children that had shared a curiosity for gardening but did not have the resources to do so. When I started brainstorming about how to make my idea happen, I did not have a solid plan. But to get started, I had to do one of the scariest things in the world: send emails.

I needed to contact community leaders that could provide some wisdom that I could use to discover the missing pieces of this project. After rounds of drafting emails and closing my eyes before clicking the send button, I was able to get in contact with a Mrs. Rich, a counselor at Dillingham Elementary who is in the audience today. We met and I learned more about the community at Dillingham and from there we put the pieces together created our dream: A school garden with a garden club. It felt amazing to finally know where in the ground to put our seed, now it was time to water it.

It turns out, watering my idea was not as straightforward as it seemed. My idea also needed fertilizer and compost. The fertilizer was learning skills like making a lesson plan, because the club had to align with the educational goals of the school. I needed to identify which subjects would be covered and plan club sessions around that. The compost was brushing up on my math skills to calculate how much soil we needed and create a budget sheet to track our expenses.

Glasses off Now I have to admit something to y'all: My teachers WEREN'T lying when they said math was useful in the real world. I learned this the hard way where I: MIGHT have done the math wrong and MIGHT have delayed the finishing the garden.

And DEFINETLY brought these fake glasses just to execute this joke.

Planning could be overwhelming, but, surprisingly, that was not the hardest part of the project. The hardest part was adopting the mindset required to lead this project. I have had leadership roles in the past, but I had never worked so closely with another community, and I started to feel the pressure. I would ask myself if I was good enough, if it was normal to doubt myself this much.

When I started this project, I did not know how to build a garden bed or run a garden club, but I was passionate about doing these things. And when I felt lost, I used that passion to override my anxiety and fear and I turn to the people around me for help. Along with Dillingham Elementary, I also consulted with the Sherman Community Garden, and they were instrumental in the construction of the garden beds. A couple years ago, I would have never thought I would be able to do something like that. Earlier, I said the thought of sending an email makes me shudder and by that time, I had sent out plenty.

And That's something that they do not tell you about watering and caring for your ideas: as they grow, you grow along with it.

In what Dillingham calls, the DandeLion Garden, plants in the garden were becoming taller centimeter by centimeter, and I was learning more about the students at the garden club session by session. The kids like math and art, but most importantly, they like having their ideas heard. They enjoy sharing their observations in class. Some students are practically jumping out of their seats to answer questions. At the DandeLion Garden club, it is okay to have a wrong answer and it is okay for a plant to wilt. The main objective to provide a space for everyone to practice skills whether it was gardening, math, or science. Students can say the wrong answer. Students can forget to carry the one in a multiplication problem. I can get confused on how to use the electronic whiteboard. Interacting with the students helped me understand how to step into the leadership role and how to step into the community. As soon as I would walk into the classroom, it became easier to find the confidence I needed to lead a DandeLion club meeting.

Now, compared to Dr. King's dream, I think some people might be scratching their heads when I say that my dream was to build one garden at one elementary school. When I say I have a dream, it means that I have a clear image of something, and I have clear images of a variety of things. I have other dreams, and you might have more than one as well. To grow that dream into, you must take action, or it will never leave your mind. Everyone starts somewhere: whether that is in

the classroom or in an email it's important to take that first step. Nobody is born with all the answers, but you might find pieces of it if you turn to the people around you. I did not do this project alone: I had friends and even an alumnus from Austin College help me retrieve supplies. Volunteers helped be build the garden and assist at the garden club. I had incredible support systems that helped me along the way that I would have never discovered if I never put that seed into the ground. So, the next time you have an idea that keeps coming back, challenge yourself to nurture it so that it becomes something more. Thank you.