

Recognized as the 2023 Distinguished Alumna from Preston High School in the Bronx, Rock The Street, Wall Street Founder and CEO Maura Cunningham addresses the 2023 graduating class:

Thank you for the generous introduction, it's such a privilege for me to be with you today — back in my old neighborhood.

Looking out at this talented group of young women, there is such a bright story that each of you are already starting to create...

You have this remarkable foundation. I see your families and they are proud beyond measure as you reach today's important milestones, and also of what is next for each of you...

Welcome parents – I have a grown daughter myself, and know this extraordinary moment well – congratulations to you too!

As mentioned, I'm Maura Cunningham, Founder & CEO of Rock the Street, Wall Street – and proud graduate of Preston High School, Go Panthers!

Graduates, you may know our school emblem has the phrase **Virtus Mille Scuta, Latin for: Virtue is 1,000 shields.**

I didn't really pay attention to that as a student, although it served me well since my own graduation here, through college, Wall Street, and then being Founder of an impactful nonprofit.

Growing up here in the Bronx, the 5th child of two Irish immigrants, I always loved the constant hum of activity right outside our doors on Calhoun Ave. As a child, I would step outside my front door and have 5 to 15 neighborhood friends to play with. And play we did - kick the can, hide and seek, hop scotch, jump rope and red rover were just a few of the games. We had our own **cosmos** here in Throggs Neck that extended from St. Frances de Chantal to Preston High School for the first 17 years of my life - all of about 4/10 of a mile.

As I got older, starting at around your age, I grew excited to learn about far away places. Sister Susan, my favorite Sisters of the Divine Compassion who taught here at Preston was my Area Studies teacher. She assigned our class a project of reading the local newspaper - The New York Times - for the entire semester and to cut out articles and

stories that interested us and share with our classmates why we found it interesting. It was at that moment that I became a newshound.

That, coupled with my affinity for math (taught by another favorite teacher of mine - Sister Veronica) - led to being counseled to major in accounting and business.

While accounting can be great, after my first semester, I knew I had to find something else with numbers. And so, I took my first economics class as a college sophomore and that was it - Economics to me was the **KEY TO THE MYSTERIES**. It had so much going for it - government and social policy, history, money flows, financial math and more... So after college, Wall Street was the natural next step for me... .

From Calhoun Ave, I commuted all the way downtown, and I mean, waaaaaay downtown, to the southern tip of Manhattan - where Wall Street is. I took the express bus on Harding Ave to Grand Central Station and then had to hop on the 4 or 5 subway train for the second half of my commute to the Wall Street stop. At my job, I cut my teeth on trading floors and had a 25-year career in finance. I **grabbed** the reins at work whenever I saw an opportunity and was given increasing responsibility in varied sectors of finance including Capital Markets, Real Estate Syndication, Mortgage-Backed Securities and financial and wealth management – basically a lot of Wall Street jargon **that simply means managing money and risk....**

I see, too, that back in March, a few Prestonites went down to the NY Stock Exchange to ring the market bell. Wasn't that exciting? I can tell you, it's an exciting profession to be a part of.

As your story begins to unfold, and you continue to understand yourself, the world, and everything that lies beyond, remain aware. This awareness can lead to a happier life, more peace, and understanding for others and the world around us.

And If I can offer one piece of advice to all of the young women in this room it is this...**be proud of what you've achieved here today. But, never think that because you earned gold stars on your exams here and throughout your academic career thus far, that in your profession, your managers will ever HAND you opportunities because of your good performance. YOU HAVE TO STAND UP AND ASK FOR THEM.** Let me repeat that...

This is a major mistake I see WAAAAAAY too often in the world of business - **women waiting to be asked to apply for their next position up.** Or, waiting **until they think they meet 100%** of the qualifications needed to get that promotion.

GO GRAB THAT OPPORTUNITY. LET YOUR COLLEGE TEACHERS AND THEN YOUR JOB MANAGERS KNOW THAT YOU WANT THAT OPPORTUNITY. THEY CANNOT READ YOUR MINDS. AND I GOT NEWS FOR YOU, TOO, ON THE QUALIFICATION FRONT - MEN APPLY FOR THE NEXT JOB UP WHEN THEY HAVE ONLY 60% OF THE QUALIFICATIONS. DOES THAT SURPRISE ANYONE?

Know, too that anecdotally, for every 10 men that let their managers know they want to be promoted, only 1 woman will make it known. **Let's change that right here with this Class of 2023 graduates.** Let this be the class that when you come back for your high school reunion in 5 years from now, you make it a point to ask each other - "OK, who among us has let it be known **repeatedly** that they wanted that next golden ring? Who has asked for those new challenges, new growth experiences, new promotions?"

I loved my work, though I was often the only woman in the room... **so you can imagine, I used some of those shields almost every day.** (I should mention here, too, that if you find yourself to be the only woman in your college class, as I did in my college math classes, view this as an opportunity. Don't be intimidated. Instead, sit toward the very front of the class. You'll get to know the professor well and that way as he/she sees that you're engaged and will make a note to call on you. The men in the classroom will think you know your stuff and may come to admire you. Find one or two among your classmates with whom you can form a study group. It makes a difference in getting through and it's more fun.

I had one terrific mentor and frankly, some that were the opposite – so again, I knew that with **the shields of Integrity, Hard Work, and Curious Mind**, I could have the time of my life, and successfully navigate the difficult spots that one encounters during the course of attending college and then, a long career. Mentors are important throughout your life. Find someone you admire and ASK them to be your mentor.

Wall Street felt like the Center of the Universe. On good days, I knew my hard work **lifted me up a rung on the economic ladder.**

But, on other days it could feel like a faraway planet, interesting to observe, though cold, and sometimes brutal. Through it all, though, the math, the constant stream of news and the excitement of watching in real time the impact events around the world had on the investment markets, plus the work ethic of my colleagues, won the day and brought me more than two decades of success.

And with those achievements and in time, it became clear that it was time for me to give back.

I want the next generation of high school girls to open their minds to the limitless possibilities associated with **STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Math) careers** - specifically - to harness the power of math and finance. To have high school girls really understand basic financial and investment skills. I want to lift the veil on the fact that financial math is nothing more than 6th grade math and that a career in finance is rewarding, impactful and gets you a seat at decision making tables.

I also want to provide girls like me who knew **not a soul** on Wall Street when starting out - with the **social capital and access** to people, internships and jobs that are usually reserved for sons from powerful families... I've got another secret for you... aptitude is sometimes not enough. One needs **access, too**, to be successful.

I was the first college graduate of my family, and the way I see it, STEM professions are exciting, purposeful and lift families out of poverty in one generation.

We can diversify these STEM talent pipelines by motivating young women entering the workforce, changing and strengthening each field **and creating a new narrative for STEM studies**.

So as you get started, let's look around this room: the talent, ideas, new ways to think, your own influence, leadership and strength, and dare I say your grit, right here, today is truly inspiring...

So my love is news & math and more recently providing girls like me with the tools to become financially independent.

In your case, what drives you? Where do you want to have access? What do you want to see achieved?? What might you study next...

At Rock The Street, Wall Street, we have Student CEOs for each student cohort... and now you are each a CEO – of your future... that can sound trite. We've heard versions of this, but let's take a moment to consider what it truly means –

You make your decisions. You control what you focus on, You choose what courses you'll take in college. You choose where you volunteer. You decide who you spend time with. How much you study...

You can go into any room knowing you have the support and foundation of this school, and your trusted friends and families. We're all rooting for you!

While many say you have your whole lives ahead of you, which you certainly and excitedly do -- I think of it another way,

I like to look at it **holistically**: EVERYTHING we try, we have the opportunity to **learn, fail, try again and again and further build ourselves**. I played both softball and basketball when I was here. Through sports, I learned how to take a face plant on the field and get right back up and get back in the game. That lesson was never lost on me for the rest of my life.

As WE grow, we can also remember to help our family and friends who have sacrificed for us, who may be having a tough day or difficult situation while we are making progress in our own lives pursuing our goals.

There is a wonderful world out there where we can continue to learn – we're lifelong learners... We're graduates of Preston High School... I can't wait to see what you choose to do -- There is no stopping you!