

Faith, Family and Education

A Conversation between

Nido R. Qubein, President, High Point University and Dr. Condoleezza Rice, 66th Secretary of State, United States of America



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EDITORS' NOTE Nido Qubein rose to prominence as an internationally known author and consultant who has given more than 7,500 presentations worldwide. He serves on the corporate boards of several Fortune 500 companies including Truist, the sixth-largest bank in the nation, La-Z-Boy and nThrive Healthcare. Qubein is also executive chairman of the Great Harvest Bread Company. Qubein became the

seventh president of High Point University in January 2005. Since that time, enrollment has quadrupled, the campus has expanded from 90 to 520 acres, and academic schools have grown from three to thirteen. Among numerous honors and recognitions that he has received, Qubein is an inductee of the Horatio Alger Association for Distinguished Americans, along with Oprah Winfrey and Colin Powell.

Qubein converses with some of the world's most influential thought leaders and change agents, many of whom are drawn to HPU's innovative campus. Their conversations focus on leadership, life skills and values that prepare HPU students to lead lives of success and significance. Below is a transcribed excerpt, edited for clarity and brevity, of Qubein's 2016 conversation with Condoleezza Rice, the 66th Secretary of State and the first woman and African American to become provost of Stanford University.

Qubein: Dr. Rice, your life has been nothing short of amazing. You are the American dream personified. You're the only child of a Presbyterian minister and a schoolteacher. You grew up in Birmingham, Alabama, during a time of segregation. How does anyone, much less an African American girl from segregated Alabama, rise to such levels of extraordinary achievement?

Rice: In my family, starting with my grandparents, education was core to everything. My parents believed that if you had a high-quality education, there was nothing that you couldn't do. You would be armored against segregation, armored against hatred, armored against prejudice. So, the idea that you can't control your circumstances, but you can control your response to your circumstances and that education gave you a way to control that response was core to who we were. It all goes back to faith, family and education.

Qubein: In your book, titled *Extraordinary, Ordinary People*, you write, "The school was completely segregated in Birmingham, Alabama. Teachers had high expectations and were pretty

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tough on low performers. To succeed, they routinely reminded us, ‘You’ll have to be twice as good.’”

Rice: I tell my students that it’s not a bad mantra to say, “I’m going to have to be twice as good,” whatever color you are, whatever gender you are. Then, you will work twice as hard, and you’ll be confident and certain of your abilities. My parents taught us to believe in our ability to succeed. They had me absolutely convinced that I may not be able to have a hamburger at the Woolworth’s lunch counter, but I could be President of the United States if I wanted to be. With all that was going on around us, my parents could have told us that we had plenty to blame for our inability to succeed, but they simply wouldn’t let us blame anyone. They would say, “Don’t let someone else’s racism be your problem.”

Qubein: What is your proudest moment in your life?

Rice: My proudest moments were when I had the opportunity to make a difference in somebody else’s life. As Secretary of State, it was whenever I had the opportunity to represent this extraordinary country. I remember getting off the plane for the first time, and it said “United States of America” behind me. I recognized that the United States is powerful, but we also lead from compassion and values. I think America has this sense of opportunity to model these values and this sense of overcoming difficulty.

Qubein: Tell us about a moment when you wanted to pinch yourself and say, “I can’t believe I am here.” Where were you?

Rice: It was my first meeting in the Oval Office, where I was the notetaker. It was a meeting with President George H. W. Bush and our ambassador in Moscow. So, we are sitting there and I’m thinking, “Wow, this is the Oval Office. Oh my goodness, that’s the President’s desk!” We are a third of the way through the meeting and I thought, “I haven’t taken any notes.” At that point, I realized I wasn’t there for the tour; I had to get back to work. That’s the moment I remember most.

Qubein: Every day, we read, we watch, and we hear about quadrants of our world that seem to be in turmoil. In that context, what is it that worries you about America?

Rice: It worries me that there are those who believe that we as a country are no longer willing to stand for the very system that prospered and kept peace. It also worries me that we have lost a sense of who we are. If the proverbial man from Mars asked you, “Who are these Americans?” you would have to say, “Well, they don’t share ethnicity, religion or nationality.” The man from Mars would say, “So what in the world is it that holds them together?” You would say, “It’s this aspiration. It’s the belief that it doesn’t matter where you came from; it matters where you are going. That belief that you can come from humble circumstances, and you can still do great things. That makes them American.” We’ve got to find a way to tap into residual optimism rather than overwhelming fear.

Qubein: You expressed that it’s not in your DNA to run for president, though you will always do public service. You were a university provost. That’s much harder than being President of the United States.

Rice: When you are provost, or president, of a great university, you get to walk around these campuses every day and really get to see the future. You get to see young people who really are optimistic. I think this may be the most public-minded generation of students I’ve ever encountered. They want to be a part of something bigger. I think they are the reason we should all be optimistic. They’re going to innovate. They’re going to change the way we do things. They’re going to take on poverty and climate change. They are going to make a difference. And as a university person, you get to see that every day.

Qubein: If you wanted to offer college students one piece of advice that they could apply in their life, given your years of experience, what would that piece of advice be?

Rice: I would tell every student, do not seek your comfort zone. Get out of your comfort zone. Do something that is really hard for you. Be around people who think differently because you don’t get to know yourself by going deeper into your comfort zone. You get to know yourself by being outside of what you’re comfortable doing. You do best when you’re willing to challenge yourself outside that which makes you feel good about yourself, outside that which makes you feel comfortable. ●

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