

Alan D. Solomont Remarks
Solomont School of Nursing Dedication Ceremony
April 27, 2017 – UMass Lowell

To quote my wife's favorite rock n' roll band, "What a long strange trip it's been."

My family originally comes from the little town of Valkeneck, in what was then Russian controlled Lithuania, about 30 miles from the big city of Vilna. The first member of the family who came to this country in 1884, was a man named Solomon Solomont. He settled in Boston's North End, and he prospered in the wholesale kosher meat business.

When my grandfather Todros Solomont was 18 years old he along with about 30 other young men in Valkeneck, were arrested by the Russian Czar's police for having revolutionary literature that was forbidden. Todros was sent to Siberia with a life sentence, and when his parents, who were distraught to lose their only son, heard from their nephew, Solomon Solomont, that America was a land of opportunity, they sold their possessions, and they also came to Boston to live.

After 20 years in Siberia, my grandfather Todros received a pardon, and he managed to contact his parents who sent him money to come to Boston. Middle-aged Todros found a young wife Alice, and they had three sons, Myer, Sy, and my father, Solomon Joseph, who was known all his life as Joe.

Todros moved the family to Lowell, where there were jobs in the sweater mills, and they settled in the Hale Howard neighborhood in a community of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. They were very poor, and they were pious, and they helped each other. My grandfather Todros became a fish monger, and about all I know of him is that he never refused fish to anyone who couldn't pay.

The three Solomont brothers, Myer, Sy, and Joe grew up poor, but after World War II, they went into a variety of businesses together, from selling Army surplus to running the hottest nightclub in town to financing washing machines and other home appliances. None of them went to college, although Myer got a law degree without it. Sy never finished high school, and my father's scholarship to Northeastern got cancelled after a bad car accident. Always in business together, they scratched their way to success, and when my

father met a Navy nurse named Ethel, he left his brothers in Lowell to raise our family in a modest neighborhood in South Brookline.

We weren't wealthy, but comfortable enough that my parents could send me to Tufts at a time when tuition was quite a bit lower than today, as were admission standards. It was the 1960's, and I got swept up in politics, opposing the Vietnam War and supporting civil rights. After graduating, and traveling for a year on a Watson Fellowship, I stumbled across a bulletin board notice at a Harvard Square storefront called Vocations for Social Change. "We are moving to Lowell to start a community organizing collective. Call Ira and Debbie." A few weeks later, Ira and Debbie Rubenzahl, Ira a recently minted PhD in physics from MIT, Stewart Mandell a graduate student in pure Mathematics, and I moved into a two bedroom, tenement apartment, across the street from where we are now on Wilder Street. Along with friends and fellow travelers in other working class cities like Lynn, Fall River, Brockton, and Dorchester, we set out to organize around local issues, and to expose the power structure that brought us the war in South East Asia and, threatened to bring the Route 495 connector through a neighborhood in Lowell where hard working, home owning Portuguese immigrants lived. We sought to link local and national issues, empower local folks to reach for

political power and to pave the way for a different and better America.

A funny thing happened to me on the way to the revolution. I got a job as an orderly at the D'Youville Manor Nursing Home just across the river, and I got fired as a result of a union organizing campaign. I enjoyed taking care of the elderly men to whom I was assigned, and I figured with a nursing degree, I could continue the organizing work and make enough money to pay the rent.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but as I visited several nursing schools, I met the Chair of the Department of Nursing at the recently created University of Lowell, the result of the merger of Lowell Tech and Lowell State Teachers College. Eleanor Shalhoup convinced me to enroll in her baccalaureate program and even offered to let me finish in three years, owing to the four year degree I had from Tufts.

I loved being a student here, coming to campus each day with my golden retriever Ishmael, who would meet me in the afternoons at the building where, as a work study student, I tutored underclassmen in Anatomy and Physiology.

I loved the science of the human body and the science of nursing. I coached a young disabled woman through her pregnancy and assisted at the birth of her child. I accompanied an elderly woman with ovarian cancer through a terminal illness, trying to apply all I learned, from Elizabeth Kubler Ross, about death and dying. At a community mental health center, I counseled patients with profound mental health challenges at an outpatient medication clinic. I loved my classmates, all 5 men and 51 women, and my teachers. I still remember how patient and supportive Jan Stecchi was with all of us, and I fell under the spell of Dr. Marilyn Rawnsley, who taught me to look within myself for wisdom and understanding.

By the time I graduated in 1977, with almost a perfect 4.0 average, this country was moving in a different direction than I'd hoped and so was I. My father offered me a job running a nursing home he was building in North Andover, promising to let me run it my way as long as I didn't lose his shirt. I shaved my beard, bought a suit and spent the next twenty years, along with wonderfully dedicated and smart colleagues, some of whom are here today, building an eldercare business which I believe set a standard for innovation, quality, and success of which I am still proud today.

As I achieved some success in business, I felt I had another opportunity to improve the world and to make our country better, but this time through politics, philanthropy, and public service. Among other things, I convinced Michael Dukakis to appoint me to the University of Lowell's board, and when I succeeded, as Board Chair, the late Dick Donohue, a man I greatly admired, I worked with my counterpart, at what is now UMass Dartmouth, their Chair Bobby Karam to merge SMU, ULowell, and UMass into a single, five campus, public university – today's University of Massachusetts.

Having the nursing school at Umass Lowell named for Susan and me is profoundly meaningful on account of the role this school and this city has played in my life and the life of my family, for literally the last century. It is also because of what this University means to the City of Lowell and to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and because of all it has achieved in recent years.

Before I came here, I attended an elite private university which played an equally important part in shaping who I am today and to which I have returned as a dean. People in Massachusetts are rightly proud of our unique constellation of private colleges and universities and of

their influence across the country and around the world. But we risk overlooking how enormously important are the public institutions of higher education to the education, prosperity and well-being of the people of this Commonwealth. My undergraduate friends at Tufts were from up and down the east coast and even from the suburbs of Boston. But my nursing school classmates were from Methuen, and Lawrence, and Haverhill, and Lowell, and most of them still reside in Massachusetts.

When I moved to Lowell in the early 1970's, the city was struggling to revive an economy that once depended on the then-empty mills that lined the Merrimack River. Look around today, and it is a different city, with mills bustling again, albeit with different uses. A key to this city's success, and of course, it is still not without its challenges, is the presence of one of the flagship campuses of a world class, public university.

I graduated from Lowell 40 years ago this spring, and a lot has happened to the nursing program since then. It transitioned from a Department to the School of Nursing in 2013. When I was still a student here, Dr. May Futrell established the first Master of Science Gerontological Nurse Practitioner Program in the country, and last

year the Nursing PhD program celebrated its 20th anniversary. The retention and graduation rates at the school are among the highest on campus, and today, there are over 3500 alumni of the Solomont School of Nursing.

Let me close with a few thank yous. To our family, friends, and colleagues, Susan and I are grateful for your sharing this special occasion with us. When Chancellor Moloney was attending Lowell State College, she helped us organize students to oppose the war in Vietnam. Jacquie, I am proud to be back on campus with you, and we are all inspired by your years of leadership and by the amazing work you are doing as Chancellor. President Marty Meehan gave up his seat in Congress to serve the people of this city and now of the Commonwealth. There is something in the air, or maybe in the water of the Merrimack, that compels us to return to our roots and which engenders a lifelong loyalty to this place. Marty, you transformed this campus, and now you are transforming the University. On behalf of all of us, thank you. The Nursing School would not have been named for Susan and me but for the kindness and generosity of two other alumni who've expressed their love and gratitude for this institution in countless ways. Rob and Donna Manning, I hope what I've just said today sheds some light on how deeply meaningful this honor is to

Susan and me. We can truly not thank you enough for the role you played in making this happen.

Last but of course not least Susan, you did not know me when I was a student here, but you do know how important my connection to Lowell and to the University is. We made the decision to put our names on this school together, I thank you for sharing this honor with me and I love you.