Thank you to the chair of the Cedar Crest College Board of Trustees, Susan Hudgins, for administering the oath of office today.

You know, Sue and I talk each week, and we joked a bit recently about how these presidential oaths of office can go awry from time to time. But I think, Sue, that we pulled it off.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the array of representatives from our federal, state, and local governments. We know, this year better than most, that their challenges are our challenges. Thank you for being with us today.

To our various other platform speakers, you, and the constituents you represent, could not have been more welcoming and supportive of me and my family in our transition to a new city, a new community, and a new home.

To the inaugural committee, and to its chair, Marie Wilde, thank you for all of your efforts. As the days have gotten longer and we have gotten closer to this day, the inaugural committee members have, somewhat jokingly, said to me, you are nice enough, Carmen, but we just can't wait for this all to be over. The fact is that they have taken great care in the planning of each and every event this week. They realized, as I have, that this is not about an individual, but rather about Cedar Crest College and the celebration of our historic institution. They were intent on putting our best foot forward, and they have done so in stellar fashion. Inaugural committee, I promise - the end is almost near.

To the Board of Trustees of Cedar Crest College, our alumnae, our tremendous faculty, our dedicated staff, and our remarkable student body:

I am privileged to serve as the 13th president of Cedar Crest College.

We have witnessed an incredible journey as an institution. From that first year in 1867, where nine young women students met for class in a basement of the Zion Reformed Church in Allentown, to today - on this crest of land - hence our name, Cedar Crest College, where nearly 2,000 students gather – dedicated to the education and advancement of women leaders.

Our current students strive in a college and world quite different from the one those first young women encountered. Cedar Crest College was born in the era of Reconstruction, when the entire country was in the midst of rebuilding. We can only imagine what those first students in 1867 envisioned for themselves, in that initial year of Congress’s Reconstruction Act - the same year the 14th Amendment was passed, and it would still be some 53 years later when those women in that first-year class would have their right to vote.

So we at Cedar Crest College [having been born in the era of Reconstruction], truly understand it, we understand what it means to build ourselves anew, because we have made that long and steep climb out of, literally, a basement. When you make a climb such as ours, you have confidence that whatever you want to achieve is possible. So, yes, while we remain imperfect, with our own challenges and opportunities, we stand proudly and fiercely assured in the knowledge that we are inferior to no one.

Our late, beloved president, Dorothy Blaney, embodied this spirit perhaps better than any of Cedar Crest College's illustrious leaders. Dr. Blaney served during some challenging times. But, her tenacity, wit, and brilliance remain as much a part of this College as its buildings, its vistas, and its grounds. Her commitment stands before us today in the form of
our students, who continue to fulfill her vision of an empowered and talented group of women, dedicated to their futures, undaunted by their fears.

II

So, today, let’s talk about how we are to embrace our future, in our own period of “reconstruction.” This past year has helped us all see that the world, in many ways, is being rebuilt. Politics, foreign relations, the economy, in our nation and, indeed, in our world, are being rebuilt and reconceived before our very eyes. And if we do not want to be left behind, then higher education and women’s colleges must do the same.

Every generation believes its calling is seminal, and maybe every college president thinks so, as well - but only a few will make it so. From Plato’s Cave to Ralph Ellison’s invisible, unnamed, and subterranean protagonist, we too, must confront the shadows of a legacy that once limited our possibilities to a world underground. And as we have already proven, the basement is only a beginning. Serving only as an environment for germination, so that we could scale beyond what we saw.

As Cedar Crest College looks just a few short years into the distance at our 150th anniversary, we have never been more prepared to address the needs for our own reconstruction. Now, make no mistake when you hear the term reconstruction. I realize that I did not come here to make Cedar Crest College great; it was already great before I arrived. But I did come to ensure that we are the model of what a 21st-century women’s college should be. What I mean by reconstruction is to build on our historic and successful past - by making old things new again. Not to do the same old things, but to make old things new again.

Our reconstruction must be one suited to the 21st century, now so suddenly in the last months of its first decade. Our new mission statement, refashioned this past year – today reads simply – but its demands are complex:

“Cedar Crest College is a liberal arts college for women dedicated to the education of the next generation of leaders. Cedar Crest College educates the whole student, preparing women for life in a global community.”

Each component of this statement of purpose – this mission – offers almost an open rebuke to three thoughts emanating from some quarters of conventional wisdom in higher education. But, we know here, at Cedar Crest College, that reconstruction means making old things new again.

Reconfiguring what is ancient and reshaping them into a 21st-century mindset.

The first and most obvious is the idea that colleges and universities cannot or ought not focus on educating women students, as such, any longer. But we know that we must reconstruct our women’s-college framework to one that is sustainable in the 21st century.

The next thought is that the liberal arts college experience is a dead or dying model. But this recent economic crisis has proven that a narrow, academic skill set is not going to be enough.

And, finally, the third notion we confront is the idea that leadership - be it in a global or more local context - cannot be fostered; it can only be discerned.

We proudly reject each of these narratives in favor of reconstruction. We object to the idea that, somehow, in our technologically inured world, a broad academic experience no longer matters. That, somehow, in our high-definition, plasma-screened lives, we cannot expect students to read a book in its entirety - and to think critically about it. We challenge the idea that gender equality is so confirmed in our society that women’s-centered education is devoid of merit or intellectual honesty. And we call into question the sentiment that leadership - particularly in our high-stakes, test-driven world - is only “natural.” We argue, rather, for a “reconstructed liberal arts college for women.”

And if we doubt this is possible, then let me remind you once again.

Yes, we are far removed from the world of 1867 - this is self-evident. But, I am the child of a father who picked cotton and ploughed fields at age six, who grew up in a town, next to a town, next to the town, that could barely be seen on the map. It was simply called “Dark Corner” in this pejorative way that you refer to a group of people unvalued.

Today, Manuel Twillie is the proud father of a teacher, a physician, and now a college president.
I am also the daughter of a mother who taught at Little Rock Central High School in the early years of desegregation - a woman who remembers the scars and horrors of a very different world than our own. These two people have taught me more than any of my degrees or professional experiences in life have - namely, that one must make possibility out of impossibility. That your future is not handed to you, it is something you make.

So, yes, I am convinced that we can be a different place. Our efforts at reconstruction are possible and we will have many others to help us make it so. And yet - there is work in it. My father – the high school principal who grew up a farmer – has taught me on many occasions, you don't stop plowing in your row until you get to the very end. Or, as we would say in the Twillie family, if we were having one of those types of discussions, “you plow to the end of your row” ... “you plow to the end of your row.”

We here at Cedar Crest College continue to plow, firm in our grip, unwearied, and mindful to keep our heads up along the way.

III

This plowing, this ongoing reconstruction, involves a number of critical components.

We must first embrace our status as a women's college – 21st-century women's colleges have to be firm in that embrace. We know that women's college graduates are disproportionately high achievers. The 21st-century, reconstructed women's college will boldly make that case, rather than shy away from it, diminish it, or hide it.

The reconstructed 21st-century women's college will emphasize women's leadership. This has and will take on a number of forms at our college, including a variety of leadership programs, lecture series, and the infusing of this leadership work throughout our academic courses and student life experience - all designed to help our students achieve at the highest levels in whatever fields they choose.

All of you who know me know that I believe that the world needs more women leaders, and our initiatives to this end are the cornerstone to our continued relevance. Frankly, they speak to our ability to be disproportionally effective in teaching leadership.

Our reconstructed women's college will tailor our leadership initiatives to our new global environment. Our objective will be to reshape the global landscape, one Cedar Crest student at a time. This work will require an emphasis on helping our students study abroad, strengthening aspects of our curriculum with a global focus, living and learning communities that seamlessly integrate academic courses and the residential experience, linkages with colleges internationally, and the development of new centers and institutes.

We will attract students who are interested in living together and thinking and researching together, and studying abroad together around issues affecting women around the world. Along with our continued commitment to community service, our goal will be to cultivate an ethic to become a citizen leader in the world community by fostering a sense of civic responsibility.

Our reconstructed 21st-century women's college, our Cedar Crest, will have – will continue to have – a traditional women's college.

Our Cedar Crest will continue to have a traditional women's college.

But we will also have graduate programs and adult education programs, and maybe even an evening college focused on adult learners. We need not view graduate education or an evening college as competition with our undergraduate mission. On the contrary, it is an enhancement of our already great offerings and intellectual community. Graduate work will ensure that our students are prepared to solve the world's big, complex problems. And continuing to educate adults will mean that we will imprint the Cedar Crest way of thinking on those learners whose thirst for knowledge has no time limit.

Our reconstructed 21st-century women's college will continue to emphasize the liberal arts. If this most recent economic crisis has taught us anything, it should be the lesson that liberal arts colleges are more relevant today than they have ever been. A generation ago, we learned that it was no longer safe to think of ourselves as staying at a company or an institution until retirement. My generation learned that we would have relatively short tenures, five years, seven years, 10 years. This generation just learned that they will not even be in the same industry a few years from now - that what they will be doing 10 years from now, the name for it, might not even exist today.

So instead of a narrowly focused skill set, what better education than one that emphasizes critical thinking, broad exposure to a diversity of ideas, takes teaching/learning seriously, and tethers our research to the creation of new knowledge.
Now, we may have to market our liberal arts foundation differently and speak the language of this generation of students, but make no mistake, a liberal arts education is the best preparation for the unknown world, the unknown challenges, and the unknown opportunities our students will clearly be facing. Of course, despite these new areas of growth, as we build our reconstructed 21st-century liberal arts college for women, we will not lose sight of the areas where we have demonstrated prowess. We will continue our stellar work in the sciences and other areas where women have been traditionally underrepresented.

Now, you may be saying to me, well, Carmen, that sounds simply wonderful. Carmen, that sounds fabulous. But, how can we be assured of success, how can we be assured that our reconstruction efforts will come to fruition? Well, I have given you one reason why we should have faith already, because we have all agreed that, individually, we are going to plow to the end of our row [we are going to do the work of it]. And, we also know that we are going to have to do things a little bit differently – you already heard my definition of reconstruction. It means making old things new again, not doing the same old thing.

But, I’ll leave you with one final thought of how we can be assured of our success. We don’t enter this reconstruction effort alone. We cannot do this alone and, even if it were possible, it would not be worth doing if we had to do it alone.

Many of you know my husband, Din, and I have two-year-old triplets. [OK, wait a minute; I am sure that all of you know that by now - I am just hoping that the students in Moore Hall don’t know it because they hear us up at five in the morning].

If this part of my life journey has taught me anything, it is just how dependent we are on one another. My husband has been a wonderful friend and giving person throughout our now 15 years together. He has made sure that I wasn’t alone in it all. Thank you, Din.

But I may have received my best lesson in this regard from Gabrielle Ambar, my daughter.

As is so often the case in preparing to get the children to bed, we do a little bit of playing with them and reading of stories before it’s time to tuck them in for good. We do sort of a little assembly-line method.

One night, as I was dressing one of the children in their pajamas, I overheard a conversation between Din and Gabrielle. Gabby was asking Din to help her play with one of her toys. She wanted to take one of the toys, a little action figure – one of the Wonder Pets, if you must know – and place it atop the shoulders of another little figure. The problem was the two figures were not compatible. The two just didn’t fit together. So Din, as he often does, explained this to Gabby, and I heard him say, “Gabby, Tuck and Ming-Ming don’t fit together, honey. You have to use your imagination.” Din had been very proud of getting the children to understand the concept of “imagination.” They did seem to be sort of getting it - you could see their little minds working… “imagination.” And then, Din looked at Gabby and said, “Gabby, you have to pretend, that’s what I mean.”

After a brief pause, Gabby stared at Din with a bit of a quizzical look in her eye and then she flashed what seemed like a knowing look, and said to my husband, “Daddy, help me to pretend. Help me to pretend, Daddy.”

In the end, we cannot imagine a future; we cannot build a better, more profound community or intellectual experience unless we imagine it together. We have to get down, get uncomfortable, imagine, and help each other. In this way, it is an invitation to see, to live, and to be better than we are today. It is the lesson of reconstruction taught to me by a two-year-old girl.

As your 13th president of Cedar Crest College, I assure you that our best days are still ahead. To you, my friends, alumnæ, faculty, students, and community, I ask that you help me in this reimagining of this already great institution. I promise you will not be working alone and I have no doubt that our Board of Trustees, the faculty, our students, our alumnæ, and friends and partners that we have not even met yet will be there with us as we make something old, new again - as we reconstruct this 21st-century liberal arts college for women dedicated to the education of the next generation of leaders.

Thank you.