

## **Her Excellency the Right Honourable Michaëlle Jean Speech on the Occasion of a Visit to Children of the Earth High School**

Winnipeg, Thursday, October 20, 2005

I am so pleased that you are the first students I am meeting as governor general of Canada because the adventure in which you are participating at this school is an example for many. My husband, Jean-Daniel Lafond, a former professor, is also delighted to be here. When we heard about your successes, we wanted to come congratulate you and tell you how proud we are. I am proud of you.

As you know, our country was born of the mingling of many cultures, and Aboriginal cultures go back to the very beginnings of our collective history. We must affirm their importance in the context of an open society and in every school in this country. The efforts you are making to promote aboriginal traditions, experiences and languages enrich all Canadians and give hope to those who, like yourselves, are working hard to preserve their culture around the world. You are models for us all. You are models for the world. And that should encourage you to continue.

I am the mother of a six-year-old girl named Marie-Éden, and I want her and all the children of our country and the world to have the means to achieve their full potential. This is why I have made young people my top priority. I sincerely believe that the future of our country and the world lies in your hands, and that we must do what is needed to prepare you for your responsibilities. Your ideas, your dreams, your concerns matter deeply to me.

For me, it is important to let the voices of all the people in this country be heard so that we may learn to know each other better and share our views of life as we live it in our neighbourhoods, our cities, our villages, our families and our schools. Each and every one of us has the opportunity to change the world around us for better. Each of us has a responsibility to make his own contribution toward achieving a great dream—the dream of a better world. Each action toward this goal is immensely important. We must never be indifferent to others. Together we must fight against the indifference that is so common nowadays.

The education that you receive here, in your school, is a priceless treasure. Remember that many young people in this world cannot get an education. My grandmother always said, “Education, my children, is the key to freedom.” She was right. It's at school that you gain knowledge, that you establish friendships sometimes lasting a lifetime, that you develop a critical mind, that you learn to assume your role as a citizen and that you open your spirit to the world. All of this together is a training in freedom.

We have the good fortune to live in a country that allows us to dream big dreams and take full part in its development. You young people are the ones who are going to be responsible for the development of our country, and you will soon be our voice in the world. You must believe in this. You must be convinced of this each day. You can count on me to make your voices heard wherever I go. And I hope with all my heart that your voices will carry far.

I would like to tell you about an experience of my own in my country of origin, Haiti, where I returned to prepare a documentary. By chance I met there, in the village where my mother was born, a little boy whose parents were very poor. They made countless sacrifices so that their son might go to school. This little boy walked many kilometres every day to get to school. He told me how grateful he was for his parents' help enabling him to obtain an education while his brothers and sisters had to work to support the family. He knew that with what he learned, one day he would have the means to improve the lives of his loved ones and his community. He did not dream of going to live somewhere else. He wanted to become a teacher or a doctor. To nourish minds or to heal bodies.

The story of this little Haitian boy touches me deeply. Not only because it speaks of the courage of a youth and his family helping him to achieve his dream. But also because it reminds me how very fortunate we are in this country to have such easy access to education. I want you to take full

advantage of it. And to know what a treasure you have. Education allows us to better understand the world around us, and by our own experience to enrich the society to which we belong. It is a promise of hope, and all of you here are the messengers. I sincerely thank your principals and your teachers, who guide you in this quest for knowledge.

But I am here today mainly to hear you speak. I would like you to tell me about your experience of this adventure in your school, how it has changed your life. About the difficulties you face. And I would like to hear about your traditions that you seek to preserve. Myself, I would like to speak about you and your school wherever I go in Canada and abroad. And I need your help so that together we may defeat all the prejudices arising from lack of understanding. I want you to be examples for all the young people who need hope and who ask only to believe that anything is possible when they do their part. So on my side, I want to be able to count on you.

Thank you for welcoming me to your school. I encourage you to keep up the good work. And now it is your turn to speak.