
Anna Quindlen Speaks at Alumni Parents Council Lecture



Anna Quindlen

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author Anna Quindlen was the featured speaker at Saint David's fourth annual Alumni Parents Council Lecture, held on Thursday Nov. 1, 2007, before an audience of eighth graders, alumni parents, trustees, faculty, and staff. Ms. Quindlen's talk, *Journalism in a Democracy*, focused on the technology-fueled changes in the journalism field and on journalism's importance to the world.

In her many years as a journalist (she began as a copy girl writing obits at age 18.), Ms. Quindlen said she has seen the newspaper business shift from a nearly exclusive concentration on the five "Ws" to a more inclusive journalism that, at its best, she said, helps us to understand ourselves. "The news we absorb every day doesn't only provide us with facts and figures or that rough draft of history. It allows us to imagine the whole wide world and our place within it," said Ms. Quindlen.

As an opinion columnist, first for *The New York Times* and now for *Newsweek*, Ms. Quindlen has been able to imbue her writing with color and imaginative details, to add the telling descriptive phrases that, as she pointed out, may be taken for granted today, but were once held in suspicion by news organizations. According to Ms. Quindlen, "Good

reporting takes (readers) to a place they didn't know they wanted to go, but are delighted to be visiting. Today, writers convey not only facts, but feelings as well."

A large portion of Ms. Quindlen's discussion centered on changes that have occurred in print journalism, and their effects on the profession. Advances in technology have resulted in the proliferation of media outlets, via cable, satellite and the Internet—all of which have altered the role of the front page. Citing columnist Russell Baker's prescient comment, made in 1969, that deemed the newspaper's front page the "dead branch of journalism," Ms. Quindlen noted, "TV and the Internet turned 'Extra Extra read all about it' to 'heard it already' in a nanosecond."

In order to survive in this competitive environment, a paper has to be different. And so, Ms. Quindlen explained that today a good paper must cover not simply hard news but also analysis, background, community information and opinion pieces, national news and lifestyle news—a far more expansive landscape than when she began in the business. "Newspapers made the self-conscious choice that to go up against TV and radio, they had to be all things to all people. Publishers could not afford to lose the goodwill of readers. They listened to the readers and that saved the business. Today, they are doing that again with the Internet." Hence newspapers operate Web sites, and function in a multi-platform environment. Interestingly, Ms. Quindlen noted that despite public opinion to the contrary, people are actually reading more books today than they were in previous years.

Ms. Quindlen also traced changes in journalism to the break from traditional reporting that emerged during the Vietnam War. Words and images that humanized rather than demonized the people of Vietnam represented a sea change from the way the media previously covered our "enemies," such as the Soviet Union. To illustrate this shift, she contrasted the iconic images of war that came from World War II and the Vietnam War: the one of American soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima, the other of a small Vietnamese girl burned by Napalm running down a road in agony. "These are two very different images of war; one makes us proud, but the other makes us feel," said Ms. Quindlen.



Alumni Parents Council co-chairs Dorothy Faux (left) and Linda Foran with Anna Quindlen.

Acknowledging the differences of opinion on whether all of the changes in the journalism field have been for the better, she posed the question “Have we traded quality for quantity?” and came down strongly on the positive side of the state of journalism today, while acknowledging that at times, the press does not do as good a job as it should. However, citing as an example the ombudsmen prevalent at most major newspapers, she noted: “At no time in history has there been such self-examination, has the media explored its responsibilities as it does today.” Ms. Quindlen also emphasized that the press today, as was true 100 years ago, has the same mission to get the story right, and to have “a sense of balance and fairness.”

What Ms. Quindlen appeared to find most exciting and positive about today’s media is how the proliferation of outlets, the differing points of view, and increased coverage of ordinary people, afford a greater opportunity for us to understand the world. Referring to the coverage of the Soviet Union during the Cold War, she noted, “If I had been able to see the reality of Russian life, or had been able to talk online to Russian teenagers, I would have understood that

they were simply ordinary people. I would have had the tools to imagine their lives, to expand the visual images and find a kinship.” Today, this is all possible. “When we write about the lives of ordinary people, whether they are in New Orleans or Beijing, we are inviting you, the reader, to take the words, images, and facts, and assemble out of them a portrait of life,” Quindlen said.

With the expansion of media outlets comes an expanded responsibility on the part of consumers to investigate and know the various outlets. “Never forget that you readers and listeners have to focus on the difference between veteran reporters and bloggers, between opinion stories and straight news, Fox and PBS. Educate yourself,” Ms. Quindlen urged. For example, while bloggers may have their role in an open society, there are definite qualitative differences—unlike a blog, a newspaper article goes through many levels of review and fact vetting prior to publication, and there is an underlying code of professionalism for reporters. It is important to understand the differences in order to evaluate a story. “Staying informed is not just an intellectual act, but a moral and ethical one as well,” said Ms. Quindlen.

Ms. Quindlen also addressed the importance of journalism in a world where we often may feel isolated and alone: “Journalism matters because when it does what it ought to do, it gives us our sense of place in the world. . . . Demands on newspapers are different now than they were 50 or 60 years ago when people needed papers to tell them what the President was doing, and had back fences to talk about their tragedies and disappointments. I think many newspapers need to be back fences for people now.”

“The best case is that the (various news media) become the ultimate democratic act because they provide understanding for all, about all.” she concluded. In fact, Ms. Quindlen believes journalism is not just important in a democracy, but for all of humanity. Simply put, she said: “Journalism matters.”

As she ended her talk, Ms. Quindlen encouraged the boys present to write, even when it is a struggle. She then answered questions posed by the eighth graders and other audience members, and was presented with a Saint David’s armband

by Student Council President Nicky Converse ’08, who thanked her for speaking to his class.

The Alumni Parents Council Lecture event, as Headmaster David O’Halloran had noted earlier in his welcoming remarks, “brings old friends together; the lecture represents the wish of alumni parents to recognize a shared cherished past, while at the same time forming a new and continuing relationship with their sons’ alma mater.” Dr. O’Halloran thanked Alumni Parents Council Co-Chairs Dorothy Faux and Linda Foran, as well as Maureen Barry, John Dearie ’95, Esther Formosa and Nancy Iannicelli—a good friend of Ms. Quindlen’s, who introduced the speaker—for their efforts in bringing the evening to fruition.

In addition to Ms. Quindlen, previous Alumni Council Lecture speakers have included Metropolitan Museum of Art Director Philippe de Montebello, former New York Mayor and Presidential Candidate Rudolph Giuliani, H.R.H. Prince Zeid Ra’ad Zeid Al-Hussein of Jordan and His Excellency Feisal Amin al-Istrabadi of Iraq. ■

Anna Quindlen’s books have appeared on fiction, nonfiction and self-help bestseller lists. Her columns have earned her many of journalism’s most prestigious awards, including the Pulitzer Prize. Currently, she writes the *Last Word* column on the back page of *Newsweek*. For many years, she was a columnist for *The New York Times* and was only the third woman to write for the paper’s influential op-ed page.

Her latest novel, *Rise and Shine* (September 2006), is a moving story of two sisters, the true meaning of success, and the qualities in life that matter most. It debuted on *The New York Times* bestseller list at #1.



Nicky Converse ’08, President of the Student Council, presents Ms. Quindlen with an honorary Saint David’s armband at the close of the lecture.



Dr. David O’Halloran with guest speaker Anna Quindlen at the fourth annual Alumni Parents Council Lecture.



The Class of 2008 with guest speaker Anna Quindlen, Headmaster David O'Halloran, and humanities teacher Nancy Iannicelli.

Excerpt of Eighth Graders' Questions for Ms. Quindlen

Q: Does the media spend too much time on entertainment?

A: Today, no matter where you live you can read The New York Times. You have access to the best that journalism has to offer. While we do have a lot of entertainment stuff, we also have so much of the good stuff—an incredible opportunity to understand the world in ways that weren't possible a few years ago.

Q: What sources for current events should people our age be choosing?

A: You should spend some time shopping around. You should look at competing outlets. There are probably a dozen online outlets I visit every day. Read newspapers, and magazines online. Read the reader comments.

Q: Will print be replaced by visual?

A: I would argue that people still read plenty of type. They might read the type online, but they still read type.

Q: What should today's greatest concerns be for journalists?

A: Getting it right—same as it was 100 years ago.