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'Race Against Yourself'

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"Don't let people tell you what you cannot do. For people not raised that way, get there in your own head."

That's the advice CNN newscaster Soledad O'Brien gave Dayton Early College Academy and University of Dayton students in a spirited, far-ranging chat before kicking off the University of Dayton's Diversity Lecture Series to an overflow crowd of 750 people on Sept. 10.

The daughter of an Afro-Cuban mother and Australian father of Irish descent, O'Brien shared anecdotes from her life, reflecting on how she rose up the ranks in broadcast journalism.

"Work hard," she advised. "Race against yourself. The great thing about being a hard worker is that it's not about your family or what college you went to. When you can outwork other people, it becomes a level playing field."

Still, the Harvard University graduate faced adversity. One news director told her he had one slot for a black person, and "I wasn't black enough." Another asked her if she would consider changing her name.

"My name is María de la Soledad Teresa O'Brien. I was named after the Virgin Mary. Of course, I'm not going to change it and get struck down," she said as the room erupted into laughter.

Turning serious, she repeated her mother's mantra: "This is who you are. Don't let anyone else weigh in on your life."

Most recently, O'Brien reported for "CNN Presents: Black in America," a sweeping landmark series revealing the state of America 40 years after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Fresh off filing reports from the Democratic and Republican national conventions, O'Brien noted in her evening address that "it's a contentious race, history is being made, and all those conversations about race and gender are being notched up a bit."

Earlier with students, she shared personal observations from interviews with famous people, calling Laura Bush "absolutely lovely" and Michelle Obama "gracious."

On whether Michelle Obama is "as articulate and kind-hearted" off camera as she is on, O'Brien said, "Every person I've interviewed has been kind-hearted to me.

"That," she added, "would be great television if they weren't."

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