

Gates Sr. touts education at Bennett

By Todd Luck
Special to Sentinel-Voice
GREENSBORO, N.C. (NNPA) - The father of the world's richest man called the lack of free, quality education one of the nation's greatest failures.

"Public schools should be an agent of social justice but too often they simply help perpetuate injustice," William H. Gates Sr. said recently during his keynote address at Bennett College's Founders' Day Convocation.

He told the crowd that a third of those in ninth grade won't finish high school. The numbers are even worse for minorities with about half of African-Americans not graduating from high school, he said. Gates added that the struggle for a better education is a continuation of the civil rights struggle.

He cited Mississippi civil rights activist Bob Moses who compared the importance of transforming math education for African-Americans to winning the right to vote.

Gates said that the most successful schools engage every student in one-on-one relationships with caring adults and that the Gates Foundation is working to make that the norm.

Educational parity it is among the many problems that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is working to address. William H. Gates Sr. is the co-chair of the foundation, which was started by his son, Bill, and his daughter-in-law. The foundation operates with a \$31.9 billion endowment, making it the world's largest charitable foundation.

Bennett President Johnnetta Cole befriended Gates when they both served as trustees on the board of United Way of America. Cole said that Gates sometimes refers to himself as "the poor one" in comparison with his multibillionaire son.

She said the first day she met Gates, she knew she had to get him to speak at Bennett.

Cole gave several examples of grants awarded by the Gates Foundation, including a billion-dollar grant to the United Negro College Fund for the Gates Millennium Scholar Program. Gates Foundation money also created the "schools within a school" concept at the new Atkins Academic

and Technology High School in Winston-Salem.

The foundation's arms have stretched around the world. Globally, Gates said, the foundation found the biggest area of need is health.

He said that poor countries are in dire need of vaccines that Americans take for granted. Malaria alone kills more than a million people a year in poor countries, which he said is the equivalent of wiping out cities the size of Charlotte, Raleigh and Greensboro every year.

Starvation and poverty are

also huge global problems the foundation is working on.

"The numbers are staggering," said Gates, who is an accomplished lawyer and philanthropic leader in his own right. "One billion people live on less than a dollar a day. One in eight people suffer from chronic hunger, which means their daily diets don't provide enough calories to sustain a healthy life."

He said sub-Saharan Africa has especially suffered. The increasing population has led farmers to cultivate

land more intensely, which strips the soil of vital nutrients needed to maintain crops. Volatile weather is also a major hindrance.

"Sixteen of the 18 most undernourished countries in the world are in Africa," Gates said.

The Gates Foundation's goal is to bring Africa its own Green Revolution, the name given to a 1940s effort of the Rockefeller Foundation when it helped farmers in Mexico.

Gates did not talk much about his famous son. He did

begin his remarks with a brief story about his daughter buying skis. He told the crowd that when the cashier noticed her name on her credit card, he asked if she was related to Bill Gates. Not wanting to start a long conversation, she said no. The cashier responded he didn't think she was related to him, otherwise she would've bought better skis.

Gates challenged Bennett students to help others by engaging in far-reaching, far-sighted thinking.

"As a steward of your

community, the greatest service you can offer is forthright farsightedness," he said.

After Gates' speech, the students announced that Bennett, along with Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, will raise money to fund a Millennium Village in Africa, helping elevate it from poverty to sustainability.

The announcement received a standing ovation from Gates.

Todd Luck writes for the Winston-Salem Chronicle.

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