



*Shefali Razdan Duggal*

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**love & honor**



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## If You See It, You Can Be It

**Actor Geena Davis inspires attendees of Miami's first Women in Leadership Symposium to be a force for gender equity**

By Alicia Auhagen '15

**Academy Award-winner Geena Davis rallies a sold-out crowd in Miami's Armstrong Student Center Pavilion to lobby for parity between the sexes.**

**On her first day of school** as an acting major at Boston University, Geena Davis and 99 other incoming freshmen were told by a professor that only 1 percent of students would ever be able to earn a living as an actor. Her response on hearing this? "These poor kids. Somebody should have told them."

Having since garnered an Academy Award for best supporting actress in *The Accidental Tourist* and starred in such blockbusters as *Thelma & Louise* and *A League of Their Own*, she attributes her success to what she calls "idiotic, unshakable faith."

The keynote speaker for Miami's first Women in Leadership Symposium, Davis shared a mix of personal stories and statistics to address the issue of gender inequality in the media. The two-day symposium

in early April – which focused on the theme "Making Our Mark" – officially launched the Miami Initiative for Advancing, Mentoring, and Investing in Women (M.I.A.M.I. Women), a university-wide push to support opportunities for women in leadership.

Americans tend to think of themselves as innovators, leaders, and example-setters for the rest of the world, Davis told the sold-out crowd in the Armstrong Student Center Pavilion. But when it comes to equal representation of women, this is "profoundly not the case," she said, citing research conducted by her Institute on Gender in Media, which found that women constitute only 18 percent of Congress, 16.1 percent of Fortune 500 boards, and 17 percent of crowd scenes in movies.





Shefali Razdan Duggal '93 (top left) with Elizabeth Mullenix, dean of the College of Creative Arts; Emily Douglas '04 (bottom).

The numbers aren't much better for women's roles in television and film, she told the audience. For every one female character, there are three male characters — a ratio that has not budged since 1946. And of the few female characters that exist, many are highly stereotyped and sexualized, she pointed out.

“What excuse can we possibly give girls in the 21st century why they are being shown nothing to aspire to and not teaching them that the sexes are absolutely equal? How can we justify training little boys to see that as well? By feeding our kids this serious imbalance right from the beginning, we are training yet another generation not to notice that there's so much gender inequality.”

In a world that is roughly half women and half men, “the message that the media is sending in every possible way is that women and girls are less valuable than men and boys,” she said. Noting the lack of parity, Davis is using her connections in the entertainment industry to appeal directly to media creators to be more aware and produce more quality roles for women.

During the second day of the symposium, speakers made it clear to attendees that women don't have to be actors, or even famous, to impact

the world. One of five alumnae who returned to the Oxford campus to share insights and advice, Shefali Razdan Duggal '93 told the audience about her lack of focus early in her career.

For her, making her mark required that she gain confidence in herself and her dreams, she said.

“I kept looking around at what I was supposed to be doing. As soon as I stopped wondering why I didn't fit in and started just embracing what is different about me and unique, then I started flourishing,” said Duggal, who co-chairs the Democratic National Committee's Women's Leadership Forum and is a member of the White House Council of Women & Girls.

Speaking on the same panel as Duggal, Emily Douglas '04 talked about how she had to rise above the naysayers who bullied her for doing the volunteer work she loved. Making *her* mark required surrounding herself with what she called a personal “board of directors” that supported her. She now encourages other women to promote more positive behaviors.

“When you see people saying things that are negative, we have to hold each other accountable and say, ‘That's not appropriate.’” Douglas is the founder of Grandma's Gifts and director of human capital at Battelle for Kids in Columbus.

The symposium was particularly inspiring for Miami University Student Foundation Executive Chair Blaire Wilson, who introduced Geena Davis at the first evening's keynote address.

“To the kid in me, Geena Davis will always be the mom in *Stuart Little*. To the woman in me today, Geena Davis is a remarkable role model, an example of what women can be,” said Wilson, a junior from Hudson, Ohio, majoring in strategic communication and minoring in economics.

For Davis, a single yet profound motto is the force behind gender equality: “If they see it, they can be it.” She has unshakable faith that someday mothers everywhere will be able to tell a story she longs to tell her own daughter. It starts:

“Once upon a time it was considered that women and girls were a little less important than men and boys.” At this point, Davis envisions her daughter looking at her incredulously and saying, “Mom, are you making this up?”

**“What excuse can we possibly give girls in the 21st century why they are being shown nothing to aspire to?”**

— Geena Davis

Alicia Auhagen is a junior from Cincinnati majoring in professional writing at Miami.