On Campus

# A Healer at the Helm

For Columbia interim president Katrina Armstrong, education is the best medicine.

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**At the Columbia Alumni Leaders Experience luncheon,** recently held under the vault of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Columbia's interim president, Katrina Armstrong, who is also dean of the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons and CEO of Columbia University Irving Medical Center, sat down with University Trustees co-chair David Greenwald '83LAW for a conversation about Columbia's future. Speaking before an audience of some three hundred alumni leaders, faculty, students, and staff, the interim president struck a tone of good-humored informality.

When Greenwald observed that “it’s not a bad thing having a physician leading the organization,” Armstrong turned to the crowd and quipped, “People say this just because they want me to write them prescriptions.” She then went on to display all the seriousness and empathy of a seasoned medical leader who, before coming to Columbia in 2022, was chair of the Department of Medicine at Harvard and chief physician at Massachusetts General Hospital, where on April 15, 2013 — her first day on the job — she helped coordinate the hospital’s treatment of thirty-nine patients wounded in the Boston Marathon bombing.

Armstrong earned a BA in architecture from Yale and an MD from Johns Hopkins and spent decades conducting research on cancer genomics and health-care disparities. In August, when Minouche Shafik resigned the Columbia presidency, the Trustees asked Armstrong to step into the breach. She embraced the role vigorously, driven by a love for the institution, a love of learning, and a love, above all, for the students: “They are the force, they are the heart, they are the soul, they are the energy,” she said.

Addressing ongoing issues that arose from the protests of 2023–24, Armstrong called for “a campus environment that is dedicated to open inquiry, to inclusion, to pluralism, to freedom of expression,” but one that also “rejects behaviors that prevent members of our community from learning, working, and thriving.” She emphasized the importance of hearing and understanding people — “what they’re feeling, what they’re carrying with them that day.” As a doctor, she said, you must learn how to listen and connect, must “continually look at everything you’re doing to ask, Is it in the best interest of that patient? Am I actually doing everything I can for that person sitting with me in an exam room?”

For Armstrong, the most effective remedy for many of the world’s ills is education, which she views as the foundation of a healthy society. “I just can’t imagine anything more important than the education that we offer, and I cannot imagine a university more important to the world than Columbia,” she said, noting the University’s special relationship with New York City, a global center of commerce, culture, and technology. Columbians, she said, “are recognizing that Columbia means so much to them, and that our collective action, our collective identity, is absolutely critical for us moving forward.”

Armstrong wondered a lot about that identity when she became interim president. She talked to people on campus and off, asking: what is Columbia? “I know that

sounds like kind of a funny question, but what *is* Columbia?" she said. "And the universal message I got is that Columbia is this living, really dynamic thing that is created mostly, to be honest, by our alumni." She then addressed the alumni leaders in the room, who represented the more than four hundred thousand Columbia graduates worldwide: "It's truly because of you that we are Columbia."

When Armstrong was done, a group of students — fifteen smiling members of the Notes and Keys, Columbia's "oldest and finest co-ed a cappella group" — assembled beneath the echoing dome of the vast stone cathedral. The room fell silent, and sophomore Chelsea Chiu lifted her voice, singing the words *Everybody needs a change* — a line from Stevie Wonder's "Don't You Worry 'bout a Thing."

The other voices entered, angelic, soulful, providing lush, delicate harmonies and rhythms; and in that moment, hope seemed to emanate from the students themselves, telling the community, through the medium of song, that Columbia was going to be all right.

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