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Poverty fight links Emma Willard panelists

Alumnae tell students to stay determined and strive to make a difference in people's lives

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TROY -- The seven women on the stage at Emma Willard had all attained success in nonprofit advocacy in different ways. But they all had the same message for the hundreds who gathered for a morning conference: you can do anything.

The theme of the conference Saturday was "Women, Power and Possibility," and each speaker communicated to the audience at the elite women's boarding school what led them to devote their lives to working to help others.

"I had always known that I wanted to do something to impact poverty in this world," said Jessica Jackley Flannery. The contrast became more acute in high school after she visited Haiti on a church-sponsored trip, then celebrated her senior prom. She asked herself how she and her friends could spend hundreds of dollars on dresses and limos when others struggle to stay alive on just dollars a day. How could these two worlds coexist?

"What I came to realize is that it's the same world," she said in a speech that opened the conference. Flannery founded Kiva.org, a worldwide network engaged in microfinance, where extremely small loans are given to people and entrepreneurs in third-world countries. The first round loaned \$3,000. This year, the organization has loaned \$50 million.

Two of the seven panelists were Emma Willard alumnae. Neelam Mehta, a 1993 graduate, founded the non-profit ClickAid in 2002. The group collects and organizes outdated and unwanted electronic equipment for distribution in underdeveloped nations.

Mehta got the idea for her group while working at a New York investment bank. "There was such a tremendous amount of waste," she said. "I was inspired by the concept of the digital divide and the power of technology."

Sierra Murdoch, a 2005 Emma Willard graduate who is currently studying environmental studies and conservation biology at Middlebury College, is working to engage youth in the issue of global warming. "I believe climate change is the most important issue of my generation," she said.

Also on stage was Erin Sprague, a Queensbury native whose nonprofit, In the Running, raises awareness about global issues through marathons and other foot races.

In her opening speech, Flannery said a dogged determination was a necessary attribute, and one that could help push women through nearly anything.

"What I've really learned is that opportunity is something we have to choose to create every day."

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