MR. BLANCHARD: Will everybody please be seated? We have a few housekeeping things to do before I introduce Pat Conroy, so please take a seat as soon as you can. I'd really appreciate that.

There are a couple of things that I want to say for all the sessions through Wednesday morning, and that is, get your cell phones and beepers and put them into the "off" position out of respect to the speakers and your fellow attendees of the conference. It will really be appreciated. Sometimes we forget about our cell phones. I have done that, and we need to just turn them off. You're here to have fun and relax and learn a few things and we don't need to have the cell phones on.

There are going to be two book signings at the conference this year. One is immediately after Pat Conroy speaks, outside here, and he will be seated there to autograph some of the books that he has written. The second one is on Wednesday, Faith Popcorn, the futurist, who will also do some book-signing at the end of that session.

We are not going to have, this year, planned gatherings at specific restaurants that you can sign up for with the exception of Aqua Star here at the hotel, for which you can sign up tomorrow night. There are eight available sittings at the Aqua Star, here at the hotel.

I do want to give you a couple of recommended restaurants that, if you can get a reservation, you ought to try. The most upscale is Elizabeth's.

One that's not on anybody's horizon except for Gene Bratek and myself and Linda Gibbs and that's the Monkey Bar Fusion Restaurant. That's number 2 on our list. And we had to come down and find out about this place.

The third, which is really the best southern cuisine, if you haven't eaten there, is The Lady and Son. You have seen the chef on TV, and we ate there last night, and it's unbelievable.

Another one is 45 South. The Bistro, which is probably the best seafood in Savannah. The Boar's Head, which is seafood, and one of the council members told me be sure and tell them about Suzie Belle. So Suzie Belle's the last on our list.

We would really encourage you to stay through the whole conference, and that is because of the final day, when we have the Reverend Lyndon Harris, who was at ground zero, and Faith Popcorn. You cannot miss Faith Popcorn because of what her predictions are for education and the trends that shape our youth today.

I'm probably forgetting something. But I want to move on to our speaker.

It is indeed a pleasure to introduce Pat Conroy. I can remember when I first encountered him. This tells you a little bit about my age. In 1971, there was a book that came out. We all know that book, and it was about a teacher, The Water is Wide, and it made a great impression upon me about someone standing up for injustices and being an idealistic first- or second-year teacher. He's always been a hero for me for that. So to be able to introduce my friend Pat Conroy is a real honor.

Pat was born in Atlanta, Georgia, to a young career military officer from Chicago and a southern beauty from Alabama whom Pat often credits for his love of language. He was the first of seven children. Pat attended the Citadel, a military college in Charleston, South Carolina, and while still a student, wrote his first book, The
Boot, a tribute to a beloved teacher.

Following graduation, Conroy taught English at Beaufort, South Carolina, after which he accepted a job teaching underprivileged children in a one-room school house on Daufuskie Island, a remote island off the South Carolina shore reachable only by boat. After a year Pat was fired for such unconventional teaching practices as his unwillingness to allow corporal punishment of his students and for his general lack of respect for the school's administration. I think all of us have been there before.

He evened the score when he exposed racism and the appalling conditions his students endured with the publication of The Water is Wide in 1972, the book I was talking about. The book won Conroy a humanitarian award from the National Education Association, and was made into the feature film "Conrack."

Now, I also know Pat because his daughter, Megan, teaches for me. So I had to get some stories about Pat. And one she shared with me is a story I think you'll enjoy. Pat was upset about the fact that Megan was teaching in the inner city schools in Oakland, California. Apparently it's a very dangerous part of the city and he begged her to leave on numerous occasions. Finally, he told her she had to leave, and she looked at him and asked, "Is this Conrack speaking?"

I had to tell that one, Pat.

Pat has written a number of other books. You all know The Great Santini, published in 1976. This autobiographical work, later made into a powerful film starring Robert Duvall, explored the conflicts of his childhood, particularly his confusion over his love and loyalty to an abusive and often dangerous father.

The Lords of Discipline, the subject of which is the Citadel, was published in 1980, a novel which exposed the school's harsh military discipline, racism and sexism, and was also made into a feature film. It also again points out that Pat's not afraid to do the popular thing, but to do the right thing.

The Prince of Tides was published in 1986 and became his most successful book. Reviewers immediately acknowledged Conroy as a master storyteller and a poetic and gifted prose stylist. This novel has become one of the most beloved novels of modern time. With over 5 million copies in print, this book has earned Conroy an international reputation. It was made into a highly successful feature film directed by Barbara Streisand.

Beach Music, which I'm sure everybody's read, published in 1995, is Conroy's sixth book. The story takes place in South Carolina and Rome. It also reaches back in time to the Holocaust and Vietnam War. This book was a tremendous international best seller, as well.

But My Losing Season, his first work of nonfiction since The Water is Wide, was published in 2002. In it Conroy takes the reader through his last year playing basketball as point guard and captain of the Citadel Bulldogs, flashing back constantly to the drama of his coming of age, presenting all the conflict and love that has been at the core of all his novels.

I just want you to know he's an unbelievable person, because he's now currently working on a cookbook. So let's stay tuned to see what this great man can do.

I want to leave you with one reason why I think he's a good speaker for this conference. A lot of people do not realize what Pat has done at the Citadel. One of the things is, he's a champion for, I would guess, diversity.

When Shannon Faulkner came to the Citadel, Pat immediately supported her at great personal expense. He was telling me a story today where he couldn't go down the streets of Charleston without someone stopping a car and yelling some very inappropriate remarks to him.
A little-known thing about Pat is that he paid for Shannon Faulkner's education after she left the Citadel.

Among his numerous awards -- and I'm only going to mention a few, Pat, because you have got a whole sheet of awards -- but ones that I think are pretty important. I'm going to end with the last one, because I'm from South Carolina. One is the National Endowment for the Arts Award for Achievement in Education in 1974.

Another was the Academy Award nomination screenplay for the best picture nominee, "The Prince of Tides," in 1986.

For My Losing Season, the American Booksellers Book of the Year, he was a nominee for that book, in 2002, and he won the Book of the Year Award from the Southeastern Booksellers for My Losing Season in 2002.

But I think the highest honor in South Carolina is receiving the Order of Palmetto in 2002, which is our greatest award in South Carolina.

We're very privileged also to have his wonderful wife, Sandra, here. Sandra, would you wave to everybody? She is an author in her own right and she's got a book coming out in a year, in January. So we look forward to that.

Without further ado, I'd like to introduce my good friend, Pat Conroy.

MR. CONROY: Thank you all very much. Thank you, Steve Blanchard.

Let me tell you how good Steve Blanchard is. I look around and I ask myself, why am I here? How did he do this?

Here's how good he is. My daughter, my beloved daughter, Megan Conroy, applied for a job at Steve's school, Porter-Gaud. While she was waiting to hear if she got the job, Steve Blanchard struck.

So I called Megan. I said, "Megan, could I accept this and if you do not get the job, I don't have to do the speech?"

My daughter, Megan, said, "That's not how you raised us."

I said, "How did I raise you?"

She said, "You raised us always to do the right thing. If I don't get the job, you've got to promise me you'll do the speech."

Steve hired a good teacher.

MR. BLANCHARD: Yes, I did.

MR. CONROY: I want to tell you three stories, things that have happened. I'm very proud of my wife, Cassandra King, whose book, The Sunday Wife, was a bestseller all over the South two years ago. And when Cassandra's book came out, I thought, being a dutiful husband, I needed to figure out a way to support my wife. So I thought I would drive her around on her southern tour of The Sunday Wife, and then always loitering in the background like a Henry James manservant, sort of being there if she needed me, but not being too visible.

So we would go from scrofulous southern town to scrofulous southern town on this endless book tour. Finally
we came to Birmingham, and she had the biggest crowd she had on the tour. A huge number of people came that night. They asked me if I would introduce my wife, Cassandra King. I said I'd be glad to, I'd be happy to, be proud to. And so I did.

And then, of course, a guy like Steve said, "How would you like to be introduced? We have to have some kind of introduction for you."

And I thought about it, and I said, "I'd like to be introduced in this way: Mr. Cassandra King."

And I was. So Mr. Cassandra King went up, gave a short, brief introduction to my beloved wife, and sat down shyly as she took over center stage.

What I love about American life, you are always surprised. When she was signing books, a woman came up to me and said, "I did not come here because of your wife tonight at all. I came here because of you, sir. I read every single book you have written and you're my favorite author by far, and I wanted you to know that."

And I said, "Thank you very much."

And she said, "But I don't think you'll ever write a better novel than Carrie." (Laughter.)

Ladies and gentlemen, you were much quicker than your speaker. I looked at her like she was nuts. And then she said, "Although I think you did a pretty good job with The Shining."

I still didn't get it. And finally, this woman said that meeting Stephen King was the greatest thing that ever happened to her, she was going to tell her grandchildren, her children. It got to be so bad, I had to leave that woman thinking I was Stephen King or I would have humiliated her.

Now, things happen that you never expect. We were in Maine this summer. Maine's a new state for us. I'm sitting there minding my own business in Maine. I like people from Maine. There was one woman in a store I was trying to get to like me because I'm congenitally friendly, and I like people to like me, but Mainers aren't like that.

So I went up to the woman in the store. I said, "Gretchen, what is your favorite time in Maine?"

And Gretchen looked at me with steely resolve and she said, "When you people leave." (Laughter.)

I was sitting there reading in Maine while my wife was fiercely writing her new book, and the garbage men came at the same time. And I looked out and saw them. They were extraordinarily friendly garbage men. I waved through the window. They waved back at me. They went around collecting the garbage.

And then there was a knock on the door. I was surprised, but I thought we'd done something wrong with the Maine garbage. So I answered the door and these two very nice men were staring at me. And one of them said, "Mr. Conroy, we know who you are. We know who your wife is. And we just left messages on both of your web sites. I hope it is not an imposition that we knock on the door and speak with you personally."

I said, "Not at all." Garbage men where I come from do not use words like "imposition." So I said, "What can I do for you?"

And this surprised me. The one Maine garbage man said, "You probably recognize my best friend. He has become world famous in the last week."
So I looked at him. I had no idea who the best friend was. He said, "He just appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show."

And I said -- this I find truly astonishing -- "Why did you appear on the Oprah Winfrey show?"

He said, "Sir, I'm legally blind."

And I said, "You do very well with the garbage, to be legally blind. It's incredible. How are you able to do it?"

He said, "I have something called pinpoint blindness. But what I do that Oprah really liked -- and she loved me, Mr. Conroy; she really loved me -- is I train seeing-eye horses."

I had just seen "Sea Biscuit," you know. I said, "I have never heard of a seeing-eye horse in my entire life."

And he said, "I'd like to write a book and I'd like the name of your agent," which I provided him.

It's surprises like this that make me love writing.

Now, Steve, I want to tell you a story about Megan, my daughter, who's a teacher at your school. I want to tell you my favorite Megan story, and I have hundreds of them.

I was signing Beach Music in 1995 in Los Angeles. And I was there what they call signing stock, just signing book after book, and a very handsome kid -- before box cutters became the most horrifying weapons on earth -- was opening these things and dumping them out, just dumping them out. And I, once again, being congenitally too friendly -- I understand this -- I'm talking with the kid, and I said, "Where are you from, kid?"

He said, "I'm from Boulder, Colorado, sir."

And I said, "No kidding. My daughter, Megan, went to the University of Colorado."

And he said, "What was your daughter's name? Maybe I knew her."

And I said, "It's a huge school, but her name is Megan Conroy."

And this kid goes -- principals, administrators -- this kid goes, "Uh," so I said, "Hey, pal, why did you go 'Uh,' when my daughter's name was mentioned?"

And he looked at me with extraordinary admiration and he said, "Mr. Conroy, I want to congratulate you. Megan Conroy was the biggest party animal in the history of the University of Colorado."

I said, "Thanks, kid, I think. Didn't Playboy Magazine have the biggest party schools in America, number one party school?"

And this kid goes, "Yes, sir, Mr. Conroy, they certainly did, the same four years that Megan was there."

So I called Megan and I told her the story. I said, "What does this story mean, Megan?"

Megan said this. "Here's what it means, Dad. I love having a good time, just like my old man." That was a good answer.

There's a story I tell about my family, the one that I love. It tells about my mother, a redneck girl out of the
hills of Alabama. When I tell you "redneck," I know what I'm talking about.

My mother read to us all during my childhood, every night. The first novel she ever read me was Gone With The Wind. And she read to us with this beautiful, mellifluous southern voice, and she would read Gone With The Wind.

I was five. Dad was overseas, and she said, "Now, son, you're going to notice a shocking resemblance between me and Miss Scarlet O'Hara. And you remember Rhett Butler? That dashing man is going to remind you of your fighter-pilot dad. And that tacky Melanie Wilkes will remind you of Aunt Helen in Orlando."

And she would go down and explain my whole world to me through characters in a novel.

We moved to New Bern, North Carolina, that year, and she read The Diary of Anne Frank. And this was an earth-shattering, life-changing reading. When you're a little boy, I'll tell you what happens when you're a little boy. You fall in love with Anne Frank. You ardently wish that you were in that attic instead of that other little creepy kid who was with Anne. You just simply fall in love with that voice, that fabulous, fabulous voice.

I was seven. My sister Carol was five. The book ends suddenly, and my sister says, "Where is Anne? What happened to her?"

And my mother, the redneck girl from Alabama, very patiently tells us about cattle cars, about deportations, about Nazis, about concentration camps, about Zyklon B. And after she did that, my sister and I are hysterical. "They killed Anne Frank? Didn't they read her book?"

And we could not get over this. Then my mother, the girl from the hills -- where this girl came from, I do not know, ladies and gentlemen -- my mother says, "I want to raise a family that will hide Jews." And she repeated it. "I want to raise a family that will hide Jews."

The next day my sister, Carol Anne, now a poet in New York City, walks over to Mrs. Orenger's house next door. Mrs. Orenger answers, and asked us what we want. And my sister, Carol, said, "We will hide you."

And Mrs. Orenger said, "Vat?"

And Carol Anne repeated, "We will hide you."

But the kind of mother that could come out of her background to give the best reading of Anne Frank in the history of literature -- I do not know how lucky I was to come from that family.

Now, I mention the word "redneck." We were in the South, South Carolina. You probably think I spent my time with John Irving and John Updike, locked in brilliant literary conversation. No, no. Let me tell you this story.

Here's what you cannot control. All of you know this. I can control much in my life. I could not control who my brothers and sisters married. So I have got one brother-in-law who proudly calls himself the Conroy Family redneck. And I said, "Bobby Joe, no one on earth deserves the term more than you. You have earned it a thousand times over."

Here's where this has gotten me. Bobby Joe calls me College Boy, just so you'll know how the relationship is.

I marched when they were trying to get the Confederate flag off the State House in Columbia. They had a march of about 50 miles. I went the first day, I went the last day, the last five miles, marching into Columbia. And then I was interviewed by a TV station, and radio stations afterwards. And I told them I wanted that
Confederate flag off that State House and why I wanted it off.

Bobby Joe hears. I get back to Beaufort, South Carolina, where I live, and Bobby Joe has left me a message. Not John Updike. Not Joyce Carol Oates. Bobby Joe. Here's what it said. Here's what I have to live through, ladies and gentlemen, because I was born in this part of the country. "Hey, bro. Saw ya on TV today." I had to change this story so I could tell it. Believe me, ladies and gentlemen, it's easy to translate. Okay?

"I got a message fer you, bro. Screw you. Screw the NAACP. Screw all the black people. Screw all super liberals -- and you know every damn one of them. Screw everybody that was even in that parade, and keep your fat butt in Beaufort." Then he ends it with this. "See ya at the family picnic this weekend, bro." And then to further complicate it, ladies and gentlemen, he says, "Love ya, bro."

So this is how strange and weird it is.

The reason I'm talking to you today is that no one who's ever lived in America has loved his teachers or his administrators more than I have. My high school principal was Bill Dufford, the most handsome, charismatic man you have ever seen. I wanted to be exactly like him when I grew up. He made education seem like a field of fire that I wanted to be a part of my entire life.

But it was Gene Norris, my English teacher, when I came to Beaufort -- I tell people, "You get close to your English teachers and stay close to them."

How close am I to Gene Norris? I'm the executor of his will. Do we talk a lot? Almost every day of our lives. Do I love Gene Norris? I adore him. I worship him, and I tell him this all the time.

He comes into my life as a teacher. I'm 15 years old. And that Christmas, after we become close in class, he gave me a copy of Look Homeward, Angel, and it was the first one I ever had inscribed to me. He said, "I think you are ready for the many pleasures of Thomas Wolfe."

Ready? The book hit me like a volcano, like a thunderclap. I went nuts for Look Homeward, Angel. I could have been sued by Thomas Wolfe's estate for the next 20 years, it had such a powerful effect.

Here's what kind of a teacher Gene Norris was. That summer, he took me to Ashville, North Carolina, to the house where Thomas Wolfe grew up. And he took me to this house, a boarding house his mother had run. And on the outside of the house he points to the rocking chair and he says, "That's where the boarders rocked after dinner each evening."

And we walked inside and I saw Thomas Wolfe's diplomas from high school, from the University of North Carolina. "There's the piano where his sister played for the boarders each night. There's a small bed where his mother slept off the kitchen. Here's where the boarders ate." Every single room we saw, Gene Norris told me something about.

Then we walked upstairs. And there was a death scene of Ben Gant's in Look Homeward, Angel, one of the most powerful death scenes in literature. If you have never read it, look it up. Anytime someone dies in a Conroy book, I know what I'm trying to do. I want my characters to die better than Thomas Wolfe's characters. I want it to be more tragic, more horrifying, more real to the readers.

He takes me to the side of the room and he says, "That is the bed where Thomas Wolfe's brother Ben died. His mother sat in that chair. His father sat in that chair. And at the end of the bed Tom Wolfe sat and watched his brother die as his lungs filled up with fluid."

That scene meant something to me and I was powerfully moved. I simply was overwhelmed by this visit, by
relating this book to something real in life.

He took me out to an apple tree. One of the guides who was taking us around said, "Thomas Wolfe thought the apples of North Carolina were the best apples in the world" (but the microphones of Savannah are the worst). He grabs me an apple. Gene Norris leaps up in this tree, grabs me an apple and says, "Eat it, boy."

So as we were heading back to Beaufort, I said, "Mr. Norris, why do you want me to eat this apple?"

And this great teacher, Gene Norris, says, "Here's why I want you to eat the apple. It's high time you learned there is no difference between life and art. Every young writer needs to know that there's a real relationship between life and art. So eat that apple, boy."

On the way back, I said, "Mr. Norris, Thomas Wolfe was lucky. I'm unlucky. His father was an artist who carved angels out of stone. His mother ran a boarding house, had stories coming into her boarding house every single night, fascinating people coming in and out with a million stories. I don't have anything like that. My father's simply a jarhead. My mother is just a housewife."

Mr. Norris was enraged at me. He said, "Did anyone tell you that your father is checked out to carry nuclear weapons against our nation's enemy?"

And I said, "That's the most terrifying thought I have ever had, Mr. Norris."

"And your mother would be the head of General Motors if she wasn't raising you seven sorry cooters. Look at your parents. Your story is all around you, Pat. All you have to do is learn how to find your story."

So I started looking. I started studying my mother and father. That October, 5:00 in the morning, my mother woke me up, said, "Get dressed."

I said, "Where are we going?"

And my mother said -- and this was thrilling to me, ladies and gentlemen -- my mother said, "It's confidential. It's classified."

And I said, "Classified?"

So she took me up in the station wagon, and we rode out to the air station at Beaufort, where my father's squadron was moving down the runway, and they took off together in what they call a scramble, and they roared overhead. With the most magnificent display of air power I have ever seen they just roared over our heads, and I looked over and my mother was saying the rosary. (I got a letter from a Sister of the Sacred Heart, so I know you even allow Catholic principals into this meeting.)

And I saw my mother saying the rosary and I said, "Mom, are you praying for Dad and his pilots?" And my mother said, "No, son, I'm praying for the repose of the Cuban pilots they're going to kill."

So I looked at my mother with new eyes. And I had known her as a gray lady and head of PTA, terrific dancer. I had known her as a carpool expert. I knew her as a spectator at every game I ever played in my life. But I looked over and I saw my mother, for the first time in my life, as a goddess of war, and was thrilled at the material I had to work for, if I ever turned to the writing life.

I turned to that writing life. And as administrators, you will understand this. When I was fired from Daufuskie Island, that was the last time I ever taught. Here is where it would be tough for even you all to hire me. My superintendent fired me for gross neglect of duty, conduct unbecoming a professional educator,
AWOL, and insubordination. Anytime I applied for a teaching job anywhere in the country, he would write a letter saying, "This young man is the most toxic human being I have ever seen in American education."

I applied to a private school, because I thought, you know, I'd have a better chance. Oh, yeah. The guy called back and said, "You're kidding, aren't you? You're joking."

And I went to get a job in Savannah, thinking I could cross the river from South Carolina, and the superintendent was on the phone with the assistant superintendent who was hiring me. And so the year on Daufuskie Island cost me the teaching life. And I have regretted it, but I have tried to put that spirit into the books I write.

Let me now tell you about Shannon Faulkner, because the spirit of Shannon Faulkner is what this conference is all about. If you think I wanted to get in trouble with the Citadel again, after The Lords of Discipline -- you know, I may look nuts, but I ain't that nuts. The Citadel is a tough place. I am telling you all, it's as tough as they get. So I tried to hold back.

But I gave a speech at a place I'd never given a speech. I gave one at the Rhode Island School of Design because my daughter was going there. But the next college on the speaking tour was the Coast Guard Academy. My ex-wife didn't know a military school from a cooking school. I said, "This has got to be a mistake. No military college has ever had me talk to them since The Lords of Discipline was published."

"No, no, no. They seem very excited."

I get off at this little airport. The English teacher who had asked me to speak is near tears. He said, "Pat, I had no idea getting you to speak would be so controversial. The Commandant of the Coast Guard is coming up here tonight, and he says if you even irritate him once, he's going to fire me. And I have tenure."

And I said, "Relax, we'll have a ball. Don't worry about it."

So I walked around this Coast Guard Academy. I'd never been asked to speak at a military academy. And they gave me four midshipman cadets to take me around, you know, they were high-ranked, and everything was fabulous.

I went to speak to the freshmen. And this was about 1991, something like that. I can't remember exactly. But I looked out at the freshmen, and said, "Hey, gang, is it as horrible for you as freshmen as it was for me at the Citadel?"

And they couldn't answer, of course, but a couple were nodding. And then I looked out again and I said, "What are you women doing here? What the hell are you doing? Are you crazy?"

And about a quarter of the class was women at the Coast Guard Academy. One of the women taking me around said, "Sir, in 1974, they passed a law in Congress saying the military Academy had to let in women."

I said, "No kidding. This is amazing. This is extraordinary."

All right. I give the talk that night. The commandant's sitting there glowering at me. But as you see, I try desperately to get crowds to like me. And since I had never talked to a corps of cadets, I had one of the greatest times I have ever had in my entire life. I told stories about the Citadel. They screamed in laughter, because a military college has a way of transferring. I had a ball.

The next day, four women of the Coast Guard Academy take me back. I'm talking with them, and I said, "What do you women want to do in the Coast Guard?"
And I don't know what I was expecting. And the young woman driving said, "I want to captain a ship, sir."

The next woman in the back says, "Command a destroyer, sir."

The other one says, "Fly an attack helicopter, sir."

I said, "No kidding."

We get to the airport, and then these treacherous, horrible women of the Coast Guard Academy throw their net. "Mr. Conroy, did you have a good time here?"

"I had a ball."

"Did you like the Coast Guard Academy?"

"I loved the Coast Guard Academy. I loved everything about it."

"What about the women of the Coast Guard Academy, Mr. Conroy? Did you like us?"

"What's not to like? You're lovely and smart and fabulous and sharp. What's not to like?"

"Mr. Conroy, when the first woman applies to the Citadel, will you support her?"

I said, "Hey, pal, you don't know the Citadel."

And this one little woman at the Coast Guard Academy said, "Mr. Conroy, beg to disagree. You don't know women." (Laughter.)

"Sure, I'll do it. I'll be glad to do it. It'll never happen in my lifetime. I will be dead 500 years before this happens."

Prophecy is not one of Conroy's strong points. Two years later I get a letter from those four damn women. "Dear Mr. Conroy. Your speech at the Coast Guard Academy was legendary. They're still talking about it. The commandant still talks about it. We simply want to remind you that you made us a promise at the airport that you would support the first woman who comes to the Citadel. What moved us most about your speech, Mr. Conroy, was not just about the military stories. What moved the Coast Guard Academy the most was your talking about serving on the Citadel's Honor Court. You will not lie, steal, cheat, or tolerate those who do. Because of the Honor Committee, because of your service on the Honor Committee, we fully expect you to uphold your word."

I tore the letter up, and I said, "These women are going to get me killed."

But I thought about it. I thought about my mother. I thought about that my family will hide Jews. I thought about everything. I thought about what I stood for, what my family stood for, what I wanted us all to stand for.

I called Shannon Faulkner's house that night. I said, "Shannon, this is Pat Conroy. I'm about to become your best friend."

By the time I got to Shannon, I was too late. The National Organization for Women and the ACLU both had her. She knew how to call press conferences. And I would say, "Shannon, I would not call a press conference when I was about to enter my freshman year at the Citadel."
"It's my right."

And it was. But I saw that it was not going to work.

Now, what Steve was talking about, the Citadel world turned on me like I have never been turned on in my life. The Lords of Discipline was a walk in the park, kids. It was nothing. I had death threats, but I have had those before. And the guys would get out of their cars in Charleston and I mean, they would stop, get out, "Conroy, screw you." And then they'd think about it and say, "Class of '59."

And another one got out and said, "Conroy, why are you trying to destroy the Citadel?"

I said, "It's just a hobby."

I would eat in restaurants, and I was in a restaurant in Charleston when the waitress went after me. And I said, "You have got to be kidding, okay?"

The waitress says, "You're trying to destroy my father's school."

And then the other tables came in and they came in. I left Charleston shaken by that.

In a Hardee's in Ravenel, South Carolina, I'm sitting there drinking a glass of iced tea when a huge obvious ex-football player from the Citadel says, "I'm going to kill you, Conroy."

And I said, "You know, let's think about this. Let's talk."

"I'm killing you right now. You're trying to destroy my college."

I saw his wife's little arms around him, backing him up. And no one in the restaurant knew what was going on except for me.

It accelerated. When Shannon Faulkner left -- and I don't know if you remember that scene, where the Citadel became Nazi Germany in America and in shots all over the world, I wrote a letter as fierce as I have ever written to the Post & Courier, and I was saying, "Citadel, here's what you did for me that I ain't seeing much of. You taught me to be a gentleman. And gentlemen don't jump up and down and cheer when a girl is run out of your school. And if you had done this, how much different the thing would have been. If there had been any leadership of this college at all -- how about, when Shannon Faulkner left, you lined the walk and the entire school saluted, because everybody can admire that kid for her courage, and nobody can doubt the courage of that kid going to that school."

But here's what happened, ladies and gentlemen. It did not stop you women at all. It did not stop or slow you women one bit. They came and they came and they come still. How are they doing? The worst guys from the Citadel who screamed at me, yelled at me, did everything to me -- they call me now. You know what they ask? "Do you know any great girls from Beaufort who would make good cadets?"

And I said, "Excuse me, Tommy. Have you had a nervous breakdown, a schizophrenic break? Excuse me, pal. What is going on?"

What has happened, and happens everywhere, women come in, and the culture of the Citadel has changed forever.

I got to go back to my first football game a couple of years ago. They said, "We don't think they'll kill you now, Pat."
So I went back to my first football game, nervous. But it was okay. Here's what I loved in that game. Two women approached me, and they saluted me. Good salutes. "Thanks for fighting for us, sir."

I said, "I would never do it again in my life. I thought those people were going to kill me and leave nothing left over."

But this is how women can get to you, ladies and gentlemen, as you know. One of them said, "We're doing great, sir. You can be proud of us, sir. We're kicking ass, sir."

And they were. And they come and they come, and they get higher-ranked and higher-ranked, and they enter into that school.

The Citadel finally forgave me. We're friends again. They gave me an honorary degree. I never taught there in my life. And they gave me a parade.

Here's what I loved about the parade. I'm sitting there, and you have to step out when your company comes out. You have to step out. You get to step out, salute your company, and they salute you. So R Company's coming by. I step out. I salute. And to my amazement, the first company commander, who is a female, is marching past me as the commander of my old company, Romeo. And what I loved about her, she winked at me as she went by.

Here's the reason I paid for Shannon Faulkner's college education. I was humiliated by the way my college treated that young girl. It horrified me. I knew my college was a better place than that. I knew my college had given me things that other colleges could not give me, but I knew the mean part of that college, and I had written about it half my life.

So when Shannon Faulkner's mother called to say they were out of money, I'm a novelist. Here's how I want that story to end. I want it to end this way, the way it did end. I wanted to start at the end, with Shannon Faulkner being sent to college by a Citadel man. And that is the way that story ended. I like the ending just fine, and I make my living writing.

Here's the last thing I wanted to tell you. When I signed a movie contract to do the screenplay of Look Homeward, Angel, the first person I called was my English teacher, Gene Norris. And Gene was powerfully moved, as I was, and he said, "Who else have you talked to, scalawag?"

And I said, "I ain't called nobody, Gene Norris. I'm calling you. You're the only guy I'm calling."

He said, "Why, Pat? Why?"

And I said, "Because of this, great English teacher," and I say this to you, people who earn your livings with students in schools, with teachers, administering, meeting boards, I say this to you. "Because, great English teacher, you were right. There is a relationship between life and art."

I thank you very much. (Applause.)

MR. BLANCHARD: Pat will entertain some questions for about six minutes. We have to end at 6:00. But please know this. Both he and I are hearing-impaired, so you'll have to yell at him. He's used to the Citadel. So questions?


SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: What is Shannon Faulkner doing now?
MR. CONROY: She's a teacher in Greenville, South Carolina. When My Losing Season came out, her mother came to the signing in Greenville, but Shannon did not. Her mother said, "She's a scorekeeper for the girls' and boys' basketball team, and they had a game tonight."

I said, "She did the right thing. I like that."

Other questions? I should have brought Bobby Joe as an audio-visual aid.

SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: When you reconnected with your teammates from the Citadel on My Losing Season, were any of them contemptuous towards you about your attitude towards the Citadel, or did they forgive you?

MR. CONROY: Here's basically what I got from my teammates. The first one who met me in Dallas said, "Conroy, you're full of crap about this women's thing. You're wrong. You're wrong. You're wrong. Welcome to Dallas, Pat. I love you."

And that's basically what I got. Now, of course, it's all great. One of them wants to send his daughter there now. I love that. But it has changed.

Administrators, principals, you're not used to asking questions.

SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: Tell us about your other in-laws. Are they as --

MR. CONROY: Please. I have people come up to me at signings, and it's always a guy. "So your family's nuts, huh?"

I say, "Yeah, my family's nuts. How about your family, pal?"

They say, "My family's great."

And I say, "Be honest. How far do we have to go in your family until I hit the first crazy? Mom? Dad? Grandpa? Grandma? Brother? Sister?"

Usually the wife says, "His mother's nuts."

SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: Who are you reading now?

MR. CONROY: I read everybody, but my favorite right now is Cassandra King.

You all want to get out there and drink, don't you? Yes, ma'am.

SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: When is your cookbook going to be published?

MR. CONROY: It's supposed to be published this October. I gave Bobby Joe one of the chapters. "Bobby Joe, you write about all the food I don't want to eat. Just put it all in there."

But it should be out this October. I hope so.

SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: Is your father still alive?


SPEAKER FROM THE FLOOR: Did your relationship with him ever improve?
MR. CONROY: Yeah. See, because I wrote The Great Santini, he hated his portrait in The Great Santini. And I said, "Dad, let me tell you about The Great Santini. There's parts I put in that book of him giving his son a flight jacket. Did you like that part?"

"Oh, I loved it."

"He sent roses to his daughter for her first prom. Did you like that part?"

"Loved it, son."

I said, "Dad, I made that up."

And my brothers and sisters and I will sit around, still, and say, "Did we miss anything? Was Dad ever nice to us? Ever?"

And we think, and we can't come up with one single thing. The thing that changed Dad was the book, The Great Santini. And he loved the movie. I said, "Dad, you don't understand America's capacity to love a Nazi. And they're going to fall in love with Robert Duvall in this role."

And Dad loved it. I mean, my favorite thing in my life with Dad is, I had a funeral, a death scene. I killed Santini. And it was the most wonderful writing I ever did. I said, "Dad, I love this. I'm going to kill you. I think it's going to satisfy something in my soul psychologically."

And so I killed Dad. When the funeral scene of The Great Santini was playing, at the opening of the movie, I looked over, and I saw a tear running down my father's cheek. He could not bear the sadness of this great human being departing from the world. And I said, "Give me a break, pal."

That's it. Anyway, I enjoyed this a lot. Thank you all so much. (Applause.)

MR. BLANCHARD: The bar is open.