

Brother, can you spare a gold mine?



Kathy Simons (2018 WTS-LA Chapter President), Photo by John Livzey, 2018

We used to say, “If you think education is expensive, try ignorance.” Jeez, it’s even a bumper sticker. Well, given what I’ve just read, sometimes I think ignorance might be a better bargain. Okay, maybe not. But I just can’t believe what I’m hearing from people these days about the cost of education. It sounds made up. This can’t be where we’re at...can it?

It’s that time of year. Those with college-aged children have just paid a bill that at one time would have meant they bought a house. Yes, I’m talking about tuition and the cost of education. Think I’m kidding? Consider this. All in for Harvard this year? \$67,580. CalTech? \$68,901. Columbia? \$66,383. And for those facing one of those bills—or more than one (!)—grab a hold of your seat and your heart medicine. Because I’m about to tell you just how bad things have gotten for you.

According to US News and World Report, in the past 20 years the average cost of tuition and fees at private national universities has jumped 157 percent. For out-of-state students at public national universities, tuition and fees have risen 194 percent. In-state tuition and fees for public national universities—supposedly the “cheap ones”—have gone up 237 percent. You know what else has gone up that much? Nothing. Well, virtually nothing. Okay, the cost of healthcare has risen comparably, if not more, but that’s a different rant...

It’s really insane. I have friends that are actually sending their kid to college in the UK (the University of Edinburgh, if you must know). You know why? Yes, it’s a great school, particularly for what he wants to study (astrophysics!). Yes, they want him to have an exciting experience. Yes, they want him to learn a different culture. Yes, they want him to be a citizen of the world. But you want to know the real underlying reason that underscores all of those? It’s cheaper. It’s cheaper for them to send their son to college in another country than it is to send him to virtually every university in the US of similar stature and that includes travel costs. Like I said. It’s just insane. Why do I go on about this? Because it’s also the time of the year when something else is approaching—the WTS-LA Annual Scholarship and Awards Dinner.

Scholarships matter. And each year when we ask you to donate to the WTS-LA Scholarship Program, we say that the stakes are extremely high. But when you put them in this kind of context, you can see that we really do mean it. This isn’t a game. And there are generations that are not going to college simply because of cost. Not ability. Not awareness. Not grit. Cost. So, as we approach the scholarship award season, I want you all to reframe the concept of scholarships. These are not gifts. These are not awards. These are not simply recognitions of achievement. Scholarships are investments.

Now, lots of people say that. Few would argue with it. And yes, we must invest in the future, we must prepare the next generation of transportation professionals. But think about what that means when a four-year education can cost as much as \$275,000. The game has changed. And we need to change with it.

WTS-LA has a long, glorious, and meaningful history of awarding substantial scholarships to deserving young women. In many cases, we were instrumental in helping some young women become the first members of their families to attend university. I have nothing but profound respect and gratitude for all of the women and men who helped raise and distribute that money. But when you consider the spiraling cost of education today, we must do more, a lot more. We must work harder than we've ever worked before. And we must raise more scholarship money than we ever have before. We must invest in these young women and help them help themselves. In some cases, our scholarships will determine whether or not someone can go to school or stay in school.

The United Negro College Fund has long used the slogan, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." It's a perfect slogan and more power to them. It's been most effective in helping them raise funds over the years, because it expresses exactly what's at stake here. Sadly, this is now true for an even larger demographic. So, this year, fund our scholarship program. Go out and solicit funds from your friends, your company, businesses you frequent, even strangers (though be careful, of course). Help us raise money to help young people achieve their dream and give back to society. Help WTS-LA invest more in our collective future. And when education comes up on the ballot, vote to make it affordable for everyone.

Okay, I lied. Of course, I think ignorance is more expensive than education in the long term. But help me and WTS-LA make that infernal equation more of a no-brainer like it used to be.