I am humbled to accept this honor from the College I have held so dear for lo these many years. Sweet Briar gave me the foundation to self confidence in my capacity to succeed. I think it does that for all its graduates, but success means different things to different people. For me, it means being comfortable in my own skin—grateful for what I can do and realistic about what I can’t do. It took separation from the cocoon of family and interaction with other students to understand that there is an almost infinite diversity of gifts with which we are imbued. In grammar school and even high school I still defined talent narrowly as the ability to sing, dance, play an instrument or draw. Sweet Briar in its beautiful, natural setting with its professors and amazing course work, its administrators and the student body are all parts of a living whole—a rich and creative community. Students in that body of the whole are nurtured as they learn and find their own values and opinions to which they take ownership by articulating and defending them.

In keeping with Sweet Briar’s philosophy of education, small classes provide opportunity for each individual’s contribution to be heard, valued, and accumulated in that body of factual and self-knowledge we call education. If we learn anything in the process of acquiring facts and an overview of the world, it is that education is a continuing process that never stops. In my case, I very often have learned it, forgotten it, and then researched to find the answer again!

My mother did not have the opportunity to attend college, but my two aunts competed to encourage me to go to their alma mater—Vassar or Sweet Briar. As you know, I chose Sweet Briar and never looked back or was sorry. My father, a strong University of Virginia alumna applauded my decision.

I always knew I was interested in government and with Drs. Hapala and Masur as major professors, my interest only intensified. The fifties did not see a hotbed of political activity, so I was not totally engaged in current affairs. I did however write a weekly column for the Sweet Briar News using information from the New York Times that I delivered to campus subscribers in my little red wagon! The self absorption of life on a college campus precluded a studied and well-rounded world view. For instance, when I went to work for J. Walter Thompson Advertising Agency after graduation, I also worked on Eisenhower’s campaign for fun. I am now a staunch Democrat and have been since the sixties.

I married Jack Ticer in 1956 and he brought me home to Alexandria from New York. He was on city council at the time and was a fourth generation Alexandrian. I had only lived in Alexandria since the seventh grade so I was viewed as a relative newcomer. During the early years of our marriage, after a short stint at an office in Washington before children, I was an avid volunteer with many organizations, especially the junior auxiliary of the Alexandria Hospital called Twig. I’ll never forget dragging three young children (before the fourth was born) to work on a new Thrift Shop. They had a very liberal education before they went to school. When I was Twig president, the fourth child went to one half year of meetings in utero and one half in the infant seat. I only highlight the volunteer work because when I ran for city council in 1982, I was elected the first time because of name recognition from community service. I eventually served for 13 years, twice as vice-mayor and twice as mayor. It was good to be the first and only woman mayor, but something of a responsibility with the men watching every move I made. We had a very successful tenure however, much of which I attribute to the woman city manager and many female heads of department. It still amazes me how much we accomplished without fanfare.

We had the first human rights ordinance in the state (very low key because of the Dillon Rule) which included protecting citizens from discrimination because of sexual orientation. My
interests and actions supported equal opportunity, fair housing, low income housing, education, and early childhood development. We established the Early Childhood Development Office and a permanent commission on early childhood education. I was so proud that Alexandria stood tall in recognizing the importance of the first five years when the brain is developed. When I was mayor in 1992, we adopted a “Healthy Families” program which had originated in Hawaii. It has been very successful in preventing child abuse and helping first time mothers and fathers with support for raising healthy, well adjusted children. During those years Carpenter’s Shelter, a homeless shelter was also established as a private effort with city support. It has provided many families and individuals with hope and services leading them to self-sufficiency.

It was difficult and time-consuming (five years), but I pushed to re-do the city’s master plan and zoning code. It was a bottom-up process with many citizens working around sometimes heated tables to come to consensus. There are 14 small area plans that have worked well to craft new and infill development to fit into Alexandria’s historic texture.

The most public and most satisfying of my efforts was to defeat Jack Kent Cooke and Governor Doug Wilder in their attempt to place the Redskins’ Stadium in Potomac Yards, at the time the largest tract of undivided, undeveloped land on the east coast. I was very much against this effort, as was the city council and much of the public in Alexandria. It was a truly successful partnership that kept it from happening.

I was talked into running for the state Senate in 1995, the middle of my second term as mayor. Another democrat was very much needed to maintain a split of 20-20 in the committees. After the election, it was an amazing journey to Richmond in 1996 in a blizzard to meet stormy conditions inside and out of the general assembly. The closeness of the numbers and the idea of sharing power for the first time put everyone on edge. We had a “non-loyal” member of the Democratic caucus, who would run to report everything to the other caucus. The committee chairman sharing actually worked well and since I didn’t know any other system having just arrived, it seemed normal to me. What did not seem normal was the time warp between Richmond and Alexandria, especially in early childhood development policy. I had been Vice-Chair of Governor Baliles Commission on early childhood programs which actually developed excellent guidelines and policies requiring partnerships with communities. When I started attending meetings of the Senate Rehabilitation and Social Services Committee, there were many members who still viewed it as a baby-sitting issue with no need for regulation. My ideas put into legislation met with deep resistance and it broke my heart to be unable to improve our state system. I have continued to serve on the Rehab and Social Services Committee which has addressed welfare reform, foster care, adoption, prisoner re-entry, and all the refinements of our ABC laws. My other standing committees are Local Government and Agriculture, Conservation and Natural Resources, which I now chair. Transportation was an original committee appointment for me, but after a five year furlough from it I am now back on the roster. In 1996, I was appointed to the new Science and Tech Commission which formulates policy recommendations between sessions and I found it fascinating. I rotated off two years ago. Because of my interest in the environment and preservation of open space, land and forests, I have been a member of the Land Conservation Foundation since 1996. I am currently serving as vice chair. Imagine my disappointment in arriving at my first meeting in 1996 to find there was no funding and very little articulation of mission. We now have a good system with very little money, many goals, but no dedicated source funding. We’ll keep working on that.

I am in awe of the accomplishments of so many to move Sweet Briar ahead of the future in its planning for innovation and new academic and social programs. Elisabeth Muhlenfeld will
be sorely missed in this successful community. She and her colleagues and professors have done a miraculous job of moving this college into the community yet maintaining the mandate to keep Sweet Briar a place “where values of integrity, academic excellence, respect for one another, and commitment to the wider community” are always in the forefront.

If there is a religious underpinning (and there is) to my public service for the past 26 years, it would be the responsibility God places on all of us to be good stewards of what we have been given—the earth, the air, our natural resources, and our children. We must protect them and make sure that our children and grandchildren have resources (renewable) for happy, productive lives. I am grateful for this honor. Thank you.