

## THE ELEANOR AND ANNA ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

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Description: In this segment, ER speaks to Sarah Gibson Blanding, the first female president of Vassar College.

Participants: ER, Sarah Gibson Blanding

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[ER:] Thank you, Anna. Today I have a delightful guest who always has much of interest to say. She is Miss Sarah Gibson Blanding, the first woman president in the eighty-five year history of Vassar College. Furthermore Miss Blanding is a woman who once was described by a *New York Post* reporter like this: "Vassar's Blanding is tall, friendly, non-frightening with casual straight-from-the-shoulder speech and startlingly beautiful eyes. She smokes, wears lipstick, and is scared to death of the press." Well, certainly so friendly a person is non-frightening but I find it hard to believe that Miss Blanding is actually scared to death of the press or of anything else. At any rate, Miss Blanding, I'm quite certain that you're not at all perturbed by the microphone.

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Oh indeed I am, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well you gained a reputation for fearlessness on several scores. One biographer has written that you're not afraid to invade fields usually dominated by men. And it's also a matter of record that when Miss Blanding served for five years as director of the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell, she was the very first person each spring to brave the icy waters of Cayuga Lake and the very last to stop swimming in the fall. And now, Miss Blanding, is there any matter you would particularly like to discuss this morning?

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Yes there is, Mrs. Roosevelt. I should like comment on the importance of maintaining academic freedom as a basis of the democratic process.

[ER:] Oh yes. You were a member of President Truman's commission on higher education. Did that commission make any recommendation on academic freedom?

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Yes it did Mrs. Roosevelt. The commission, which reported to President Truman last year after a very thorough study of the issues facing higher education today, took a strong position regarding academic freedom in our colleges and universities.

[ER:] Can you tell me in a few words what it reported?

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Well, it said no society can long remain free when its educational institutions are not free. And free institutions are not possible without guarantees of academic freedom for the individual. Of course, freedom for the individual implies his acceptance of basic democratic attitudes. In other words, the teacher can no more be immune from the obligations of citizenship than the rest of our citizens. But by the same token he must be in no way restricted, just because he is a teacher, in his freedom to inquire, to think, and to speak out his own opinions. And this, I fear, is what has happened recently in some places in this country.

[ER:] Is there any reason why the problem of academic freedom is particularly important to us today?

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Academic freedom is at all times an essential of democracy. But it's even more important in periods of tension. I believe most of us will agree that the world is passing through such a period right now. In many parts of the world, freedom is scarcely understood. If we are to champion the democratic way of life in this country we must see to it that our own classrooms and campuses are open to free inquiry and opinion.

[ER:] Do you find that special pressure to curtail academic freedom is being put upon our colleges and universities, Miss Blanding?

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Well, rather. For example, the headlines that have emanated from the Un-American Activities Committee investigations have prompted a good many of the letters which have come into my office lately from parents, alumni, and from just interested citizens. Some of these have betrayed an increased nervousness, almost a fear of academic freedom. And they worry me because they show how quickly Americans, and even well informed ones, can forget such a basic democratic principle as academic freedom.

[ER:] I wonder how you answer these people.

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Well I urge the writers, particularly the parents, not to get excited and to have faith in the integrity of those who are teaching our young people. And I point out that neither iron nor silk curtains can keep out ideas. Young people, when they are learning, must come into contact with all kinds of ideas, and it is far better for them to have experience with controversial issues than to be sheltered from them and remain unaware of some of the mighty problems facing us. Only by being exposed to ideas can they learn to make their own judgments, and to gain a real understanding of and faith in our democracy.

[ER:] What can people generally do to help maintain academic freedom within our institutions of higher learning?

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] Well as President Truman's commission pointed out, far more must be done both by laymen and by educators to acquaint the American people with the urgency of academic freedom and the need for them to get behind it right down in their own communities.

[ER:] You know, Miss Blanding, I happened to meet a young Vassar student the other day and in the course of the conversation I happened to mention your name. You should have seen her face light up. I asked if she knew you and she replied that with fourteen hundred students naturally it's impossible for all to have a personal acquaintance with the president. But she told me enthusiastically, "Anyway all of us feel that Miss Blanding is a personal friend of ours." And I don't think any better tribute could be paid to a college president.

[Sarah Gibson Blanding:] I certainly am glad my Vassar students feel that way. Of course as a matter of fact, so do I.

[ER:] I think my radio audience will feel with me that we've had a visit from a courageous person. Thank you very much, Miss Blanding. And now back to my daughter, Anna, in Hollywood. (5:59)

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