

PHOTO BY BETTY KRENEK

# I See the World with Open Eyes

BY FLYNN COLEMAN '99

**S**everal years ago, I had the honor of coming back home to LA to accept Brentwood School's inaugural Women in Sports award. As I walked across the gym and up to the podium to give my speech, I recalled looking out at the bleachers I had sat in so many times. And I thought about the path I had taken that had brought me to this day.

That journey began at Brentwood. During my junior high and high school years I was fortunate to have some incredible experiences traveling. I built schoolhouses in Fiji and homes in Mexico, and lived with a family in Italy for a summer. On these adventures I learned the value of stepping outside your comfort zone and choosing the road less taken. Most importantly, I met people who significantly impacted the way I viewed the world, and who opened my eyes to the beautiful, pulsing diversity and humanity that connects us all.

When it came time to choose a college, I could have followed my classmates and friends and gone to a higher ranked school I had been admitted to, but something in my gut told me to go another way and find my own story.

In my sophomore year, when I was deciding where to study abroad, I again chose a less popular destination. Studying with a member of Chile's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, playing on a men's soccer team in Santiago, and working with a women's collective of artisans and entrepreneurs who had come together to rebuild after an era of severe human rights abuse awakened my passion for international human rights and gave me immense perspective. I learned about love and loss, and about what it takes to reconstruct societies, communities, families, and how when we come together we can overcome anything.

When I spoke at Brentwood, I talked about Cambodia, where I was posted as a Luce Scholar. I remembered the girls who would come out to watch me play soccer, mesmerized by seeing a woman out there on the field with the men. Those evenings on

**FLYNN COLEMAN '99**  
 CONTINUED


PHOTO BY JORGE ESTUARDO DE LEÓN



PHOTO BY BETTY KRENEK

 LEFT: **Flynn Coleman enjoys an afternoon with friends in San Antonio Palopó, Guatemala.**

 RIGHT: **Flynn Coleman connects with the families of her partners in Muhanga, Rwanda.**

the pitch also informed my work with survivors of genocide and advocating on behalf of women looking for brighter futures.

And thus a pattern emerged—some of my most vital education came from the communities I lived in instead of the institutions I attended. So I next decided against Yale for graduate school and opted for another course. I spent part of my time as a law student in Senegal, volunteered in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, threw holiday parties and brought gifts for children in earthquake ravaged Haiti, and bonded with chimpanzees working at a primate rescue sanctuary in Spain. And my time living in Ireland and the Netherlands, the UK, Geneva, and Hong Kong showed me how to connect my work, research, and studies in culture, politics, literature, human rights law, and foreign policy with the daily joy and suffering of people in their struggles and triumphs.

It is these unconventional choices, connections, and life experiences that have led me to my current career as an international

human rights lawyer, author, teacher, social innovator, founder and CEO, ethical fashion designer, and the founding fellow at NYU Law's Grunin Center for Law and Social Entrepreneurship.

It can be difficult to hear your own voice amidst the crowd. When I spoke about the future of humanity, human rights, and technology from TEDx to Atlanta Symphony Hall, the sounds reverberated through the auditorium. There is always a moment, right before you begin to speak, when the stage is bright and the house lights are dim, when you wonder if you'll forget it all. But you don't. If you've practiced enough, if you've lived it, if you have people in the audience who will cheer you on regardless of whether you stumble or soar, if you remember what got you there in the first place, the causes that make you feel alive and the people you want to support, then the words come, the ideas come.

And if they do not, if you falter, you can still get up again. You can flip the page and write your next chapter. You can turn your biggest

fall into a chance to pick yourself up, wipe off the dirt, the blood, and the tears, and start all over again.

*"It's never too late to be who you might have been."*—George Eliot

Your life is the story you tell the world. And with each moment, each experience, we write another page.

What I have learned, from conversations I've had with people around the world, from survivors of war crimes and injustice, to friends in a little-known part of the Italian countryside, and on soccer fields worldwide, in government buildings and homes in villages across the sea from where I grew up, is that we all deserve the opportunity to make our own choices about our lives, and to have our voices heard.

Be brave enough to take your own whirlwind adventure. To have the courageous conversations you need to have. To be vulnerable with someone you love. To be kind to a stranger. To change your mind. To try again.

*"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you*

“And thus a pattern emerged—some of my most vital education came from the communities I lived in instead of the institutions I attended.”

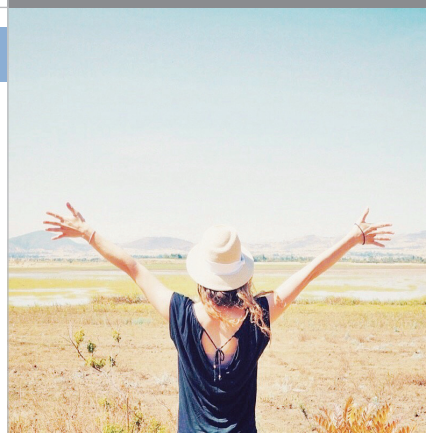
*didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.*”—Mark Twain

In the grand scheme of it all, we are just small specks of dust. But recognizing this can free us up to live the life we dream of, to do things that matter, because ultimately that's all we have. Time marches forward. We can't go back. But we can catch glimpses of who we want to be, who we are still becoming, and let that spark guide us ever onward.

As I finished my speech in Brentwood's gym that day, again I gazed out at the bleachers, and saw my friends and family, students

and teachers, alumni and coaches. I heard them cheering, clapping, and whistling.

So each time I face an important decision, I try to muster the courage to choose the bold route, to try something new, to help another when I can, to throw off the bowlines, to be brave with my heart, to do what I think I cannot do, because they are always there. I feel the warmth of family and friends, the compassion of strangers, and I am inspired by the resilience and valor of people I've met along the way. You are never alone, and actually the more freedom you feel the less alone you become. If you have the will to explore, to dream, to discover, to seek your own path, you'll always find your way home. ■



**Flynn Coleman '99** is an international human rights attorney, an educator, an author, a public speaker, a social entrepreneur and innovator, an ethical fashion designer, a mindfulness, innovation, and creativity teacher, a social justice activist, a former competitive athlete, and a founder and CEO. Flynn is also the inaugural fellow at the Grunin Center for Law and Social Entrepreneurship at NYU School of Law.

Flynn speaks five languages, and has worked with the United Nations, the United States federal government, and with international corporations, universities, and human rights organizations around the world. She holds a BSFS from Georgetown University, a JD from UC Berkeley School of Law, and an LLM from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has also studied at La Sorbonne, the University of Cambridge, Trinity College Dublin, La Universidad de Chile, Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, Senegal, and Université de Genève.

LEARN MORE:

[flynncoleman.community](http://flynncoleman.community)

Twitter: [@flynncoleman](https://twitter.com/flynncoleman)

Instagram: [@flynncoleman](https://www.instagram.com/flynncoleman)



PHOTO BY LUKE BEARD

Flynn Coleman speaks at Plywood Presents 2017 at Atlanta Symphony Hall.