ROOTS AND WINGS: Celebrating Your Institution’s Heritage

by Robert K. Glenn

When one is given the privilege and honor to serve an academic community as its leader, clearly that is a great day for both the new president and the institution. The thing about beginnings is they give us all a chance to see the future with fresh eyes. The inauguration of a president is the ceremony where the new leader has an opportunity to engage the academic and greater community to look anew at the institution and to see the future with new promise. But, I would assert it is very important that the focus be on the institution, not solely on the president.

When I was selected president of Athens State University (Ala.) in 2008, I had the unique honor of following in the footsteps of my great grandfather, who was president of the institution when it was Athens Female College in 1902. I was initially reluctant to consider an inaugural ceremony because I did not want to appear self indulgent. Another president who was inaugurated at a different state institution was described as appearing like Ben Hur arriving for the chariot races. I came to realize, however, that this was an opportunity for the institution to make a statement to our community and to the state. So we set about leveraging my familial connection to make the larger statement that I was connected to Athens State like Athens State was connected to Alabama.

The event’s theme was “Roots and Wings: An Institution Rooted in a Historical Foundation of Building Success Stories by Providing the Wings to Discover New Horizons. As the oldest educational institution in the state, we celebrated our history. We wrote a new short history of the institution that highlighted the contributions of each president. We planted trees secured from the historic tree project on the campus in honor of my great grandfather (a Lincoln Dogwood) and in honor of my installation (an Alamo White Oak). We brought back alumni who talked about the impact faculty had on their lives and we celebrated those faculty. We had formal faculty presentations on the history of Athens State. Since we were once a Methodist institution, North Alabama Bishop Will Willimon came to campus to deliver a keynote speech focusing on the impact of the Methodist church on higher education in the past, and how it might impact higher education in the future. The speech took place in the First Methodist Church where my great grandfather would have stood long ago in that same pulpit and appealed to the community for support.

And at the final ceremony, after being sworn in by the system chancellor, with my father holding the Bible upon which I swore my fealty to duty and the institution, I had a chance to share with the faculty, a large contingency of the community, and many state officials who had never been to our campus, my view of the future.

I do not have any delusions that my words were any stronger that day than any other day, but taken within the context we were able to create, it gave those assembled an opportunity to see Athens State like they never had before. That was the overwhelming feedback we received afterwards. And so, I highly recommend that new presidents give serious consideration to some kind of event. Just remember to leave the toga, the chariot and the brace of white horses at your last institution.

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