

Thank you for joining me in this celebration of Thomas University.

It's wonderful to see family, old and new friends, colleagues, Thomas personnel, students, and community partners, all here...for this milestone event in the history of the university.

I would like to begin with recognition of several groups who have been most instrumental in sustaining Thomas through its evolution from a sectarian two-year school, to a community college, four-year institution and now a budding university, offering graduate programs.

First, thanks to the faculty and staff, who are certainly among the most dedicated professionals I have ever had the good fortune of being associated with. Without their dedication, hard work, and expertise, the university would not be here today.

When we speak of a campus as a community I often think, first, of the generations of faculty and staff who serve the school...as it is they who carry on the traditions and values of all great colleges and universities...even while leaders, come and go.

It is, largely, their relationship with students that ultimately determines the quality of the educational experience and thus the character of the school.

On behalf of the faculty and staff, I want to thank the Board of Trustees, whose commitment to the idea of providing access to higher education in the greater Thomasville region deserves appreciation from all of us. Their tireless volunteer effort, expertise, and financial commitments are the backbone of leadership at the university. This entire community owes you a debt of gratitude for your dedication to Thomas University.

I want to thank our community partners, many of whom are here today who recognize the university for what it is...a principle resource to the community for workforce and economic development and a contributor to the overall quality of life in Southwest Georgia.

On a personal level, I would like to thank my many friends and former colleagues who have come from far distances to celebrate with us. Your friendship, support and guidance, over the years, have been appreciated....and your presence today is heartwarming.

Special thanks to three individuals whom I am pleased to call both mentor and friend. Dr. Joe Burke, of Keuka College who modeled presidential behavior and prepared me for this assignment...and Dr. Richard Pegnetter, of Florida Gulf Coast University, whose visionary style of leadership and entrepreneurial spirit, inspired me to be bold in my own thinking at a time when I was readying myself for this appointment.

Also to Dr. Art Kirk, President of St. Leo University who inspired me in the late 1980s to examine the unique character of small schools and truly set me on my journey to this sector of higher education.

I also want to add a special thanks to the new President of Southwest Georgia Technical College, Dr. Glenn Deibert who is quickly becoming a valued ally of Thomas University and also a new friend.

To my family, who have provided the anchor that we all need, at times, to weather those rough patches. Age and many miles have made me appreciate, even more deeply, the importance of the family unit.

To our son Ryan, who has always been and will continue to be my greatest achievement in life...with a little help from Mary, of course. And to his beautiful wife Tara, who has enriched our family with her presence.

To my wife Mary, who has stood by me through all of the years, in spite of the demands that I place on her. We have come a long way together. Putting each other through our own formal education, over a sixteen year period, I am sure you would agree, Mary, that it has been an incredible journey to Thomasville. As we look back over the years, how could we have ever known it would turn out this good?

Finally, to four people, only one of whom could be here today...

This inauguration is dedicated to them...as their influence on me has been much greater than I am sure they ever realized...and this is my time to thank them.

To my mother and father in law, who brought joy and laughter into the lives of everyone around them for so many years...who, as members of the Greatest Generation, taught us that the American Dream was real...that it came with hard work and perseverance, even in the face of terrible odds. Their good spirit, and love of life, is a legacy that will not soon be forgotten. I miss them dearly.

To Benjamin Gee, who has been my Dad since the age of five. He taught me the value of standing on one's own two feet, pride in hard work and the discipline to do things right. He also taught me that, regardless of our station in life, all earnest work is noble.

Finally, and most important for me today, to my departed mother...a woman of great courage and fortitude who I always admired for her tenacity and grit...although I did not tell her this enough. She taught me, through her own behaviors, to be independent in my thinking and strong in the face of adversity. These lessons, early in life, have served me well, both personally and professionally. I often think back to her courage as a young woman, determined to make a better life for both of us.

I do regret that my mother could not be here today for this event...it would have made her proud and happy.

...Now to the business of higher education...

In many respects, my journey to Thomas University began in 1970, upon my return from military service, marriage to my lifelong partner, and first serious entry into higher education.

How fortunate I have been to, serendipitously, enter a career that provided both a livelihood and a lifetime of rich experiences that have been more of an adventure than work.

As I matured in this profession and pursued the opportunities that come with being a life long learner, my view of education as a catalyst for affecting personal and professional change, and as a vehicle for realizing one's full potential...took shape.

I know that many of you here today could tell a similar story as this is not about me...it's about what higher education in the United States, and schools like Thomas University, has meant to the legions of individuals who were given a chance for a better life through education...a chance to discover their full potential.

In preparing for this presentation, and as I reflected back on the years, it has become more clear to me that I was meant to be here today...in this community...and at this university.

I say this because Thomas University, what it stands for, what it has become, and what it has contributed to the quality of life for so many...embodies all that I have come to cherish in community-based higher education and in the role of small schools.

After twenty rewarding years at a large university I began to lose the passion which has been so important to me in my work...that passion was rekindled when I discovered the unique character and purpose of small schools like Thomas University. It was an awakening to something wonderful.

Through more good fortune, excellent mentorship, further study and work assignments that allowed me to be creative and entrepreneurial, I found my way to the small school, independent, sector of higher education.

Like many others who have chosen this type of school for their life's work, I was captured by their stories of endurance and purposeful role in higher education.

Without the benefit of national reputations, the financial backing of the public sector, or the most modern and expansive facilities, these schools still endured.

They have endured because they possess values that are sometimes difficult to find in other sectors of higher education...values that have been important to me and I know are important to many of you...

Let me share some of those values with you...

Like many small schools that quietly serve their own communities, Thomas University has evolved as the demands of this region grew and prospered, providing an increasingly relevant portfolio of academic programs.

Small schools, unencumbered by bureaucracy and having few administrative obstacles, can more readily adapt to change. Leadership and faculty can work closely in developing those new ideas that advance the university.

Small schools understand the nature of working with limited resources and thus are more resourceful than most. Thomas University, like all small independent schools, must rely on its own means to fund the enterprise. As a recipient of minimal public funding, it must practice fiscal responsibility and judiciously manage its affairs, in order to continue serving its community.

Thomas University has welcomed its responsibility for being a community partner in the social enterprise of Southwest Georgia.

Regardless of the aspirations and intentions we have to build and expand distance and satellite programming, both domestically and abroad, Thomas University's first commitment is to this region of Georgia. Such is the commitment that virtually all small, community based, schools make to their region.

It is of little surprise to me that small, community-based, schools are consistently praised by students, through national surveys, for their unique ability to...

Engage students at a level that can only be achieved through an intimate learning environment

For their ability to create a learning environment built on trust and mutual respect

For their ability to attract and retain a faculty who engage in creative pedagogy... and who *truly* love their craft. To them, it's all about the teaching...and I am pleased to report that we have among the best at Thomas University.

Thomas University will always place excellence in teaching...and a *genuine* student/teacher relationship, as the central theme in its mission.

Excellence in teaching is not something that comes naturally to any school...it comes from a dedicated professional faculty who recognize the need to

continuously update and improve their work and an administration that makes this an institutional priority.

Virtually every college and university in the country will make a claim that they are committed to the welfare of students and the teaching process...and, to some degree, most are...

But it's the school that moves beyond the rhetoric and holds itself accountable for delivering on this promise...that gets genuine results.

As do I...Thomas University believes that hard work, diligence and a commitment to improving oneself can propel us to extraordinary heights...often much further than we, or others, ever thought imaginable.

...you know, the human potential is an extraordinary thing in that we have yet to discover its boundaries.

Isn't it wonderful that we live in a society that affords us the opportunity to explore and expand those boundaries through education?

Thomas University has always and will continue to place a high premium on its diverse student body...who bring to the classroom their unique experiences and perspectives of the world, enhancing the educational process for themselves and everyone around them.

I would like you to meet three students from Thomas University who are doing just that. Their backgrounds are quite different, yet all are members of the Thomas University community, are doing well, and will go on to serve their community in significant ways...

Please meet June Robinson. June is a third year Early Childhood Education Major; as you already know, June is also President of Student Government. A single mother of three children and grandmother to three more, June decided later in life to attend college. June has told me that she returned to school because of her passion for the welfare of children and she became an officer in student government because she knew she had leadership qualities...and, in her words, "that her voice could make a difference."

Please meet Mathew Keown...Mathew is a Thomas County High graduate and now a 3rd year History major; Mathew is married and works to support his family, as do the majority of Thomas University students, while carrying a full load of courses and maintaining an outstanding GPA. Mathew is still a young man but he has lived more than many of us. With four years in the U.S. Army behind him, serving with the 3rd Infantry Division, Mathew is also a combat veteran of the war in Iraq. Thank you Mathew for your service to this country...and to the 3rd Infantry Division which I believe is readying for its third deployment to Iraq.

Please meet Eric Johnson...Eric is a young man who has educational aspirations that will take him beyond Thomas University. He is a second year, straight A, student who aspires to, someday, be a Physical Therapist. Eric is also a valued member of Thomas University's baseball team. We will do our part in laying the educational foundation that Eric needs to go on and pursue this worthy professional career.

I am proud that these students have entrusted us at Thomas University to prepare them for what lies ahead...and to meet the real challenges of life.

...and that we have the means at Thomas University to give them the individual attention they need to discover their personal best.

...and that, someday, they will go on to work and to further studies knowing that Thomas University was there for them at a time when they needed us.

...most of all, I am proud of the fact that these are the things that we at Thomas University do quite naturally...

Before closing I want share a little about what you can expect to see happening at Thomas University in the upcoming year.

We will be proactive in our outreach to the public...searching for partnerships that will provide new educational opportunities for those we serve and leveraging the resources that we all have to share.

We will organize and manage our internal affairs in such a way that the faculty and staff are assured a working environment that enhances and not encumbers their work.

We will set a strategic course that is grounded in sound decision-making...that stretches the university's potential but does so in a way that we all can see its merit.

We will undertake a detailed study of our physical plant to determine, what, if any, additional properties are required to advance the university's mission.

We will engage the university's many constituencies to assist us in this work...as we need your ideas, your guidance and your financial support in order to achieve our educational goals.

...and, we will go on educating the citizens of this region as well as those who come from far away to be part of our community.

Through that education, we instill in our students an appreciation for their own self worth, and pride in personal accomplishment

We will help them to better understand that an educated person has a responsibility to make the world better for all.

We will remind them that the power of their new found knowledge should be used wisely as we live in an irrational world that is in need of constant care.

Finally...and most important to me and my colleagues at Thomas University...

We will help our students discover that great thinkers possess an intellectual curiosity that is not easily satisfied.

That our personal journeys can take us to places of the mind...and the heart...that we never thought imaginable...and that the rewards are great for those who are passionate about reaching their full potential.

I will close with a quote from Margaret Mead, noted anthropologist who shared my unwavering belief in the potential of every human being...she once said...

“Don’t ever believe that a small group of people couldn’t change the world...indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

Thank you again for coming today.