



PRESIDENT SCOTT L WYATT • INAUGURAL ADDRESS

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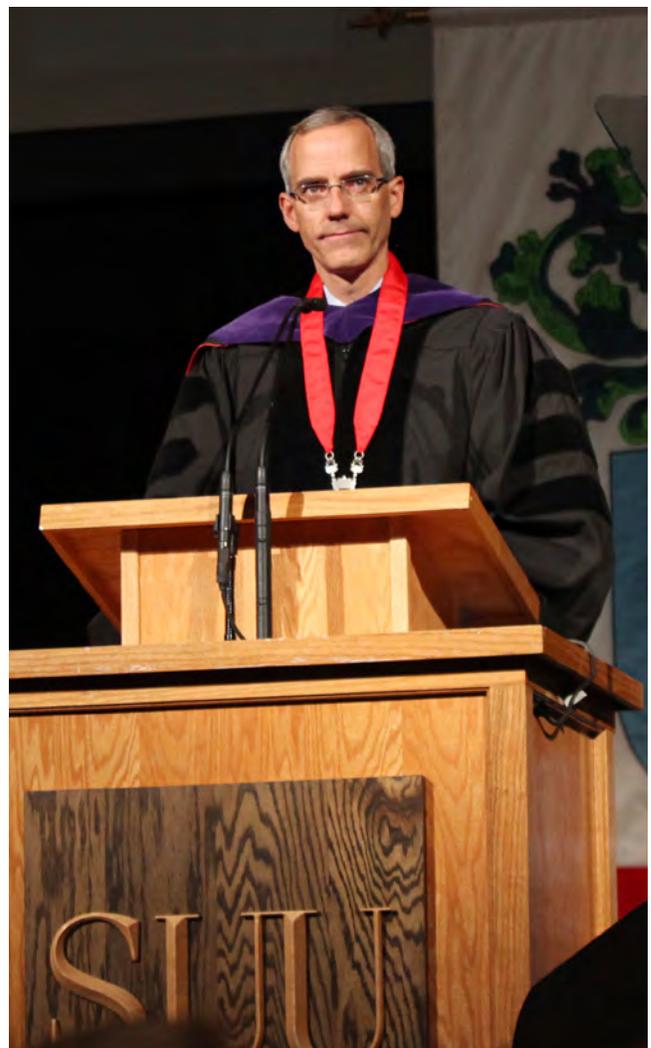
Our university has one of the most storied foundings of any university in America. And today I am indebted to Ann O. Leavitt and the two intensive years she spent in research and writing of the book, *Southern Utah University, The First 100 Years*.

There is a true story, no better told than by former President Gerald R. Sherratt, about a eight-year-old, 1,600 pound draft horse by the name of “Old Sorrel.” I’m not going to attempt to retell his story, but I do want to pick up the story and tell you about a man by the name of Neil Bladen, whose portrait hangs in our Gilbert Great Hall.

For those of you who haven’t heard the story—very briefly, Cedar City won the bid to have a branch campus of the state’s flagship university established in their small community of 1,200 people. In consideration of the award, the city residents had to donate land and build the first schoolhouse, under very exacting specifications. They started classes in the fall of 1897 in a church building and hoped the State would allow them to continue there until the required structure could be raised. In a devastating blow, the city residents found out on January 1, 1898, that the church building was not acceptable as a school. They were given notice that if they did not have the building completed, exactly as required, by September, eight months away, they would lose their branch campus.

They had no building materials, no money and it was the dead of winter.

They knew where some lumber was stored, but it would be hard to get to. And so a group of men with horses set



out four days later in a desperate attempt to reach Jensen's sawmill up on the mountain, near current day Brian Head. They had never been on the mountain in winter. They could not know what awaited, high above at 10,000 feet. Five days into the journey, trudging through snow up the mountain, they hit a furious storm. It was described as, "a steady, quiet snowstorm pouring itself relentlessly down in flakes so large it appeared as if they were looking into a wall of great white sheets, flapping in their faces." They had little food left, for them or their horses. Their clothing was drenched. The trail they had beaten down on the way in was obliterated in the night's storm. Jim Hunter, a member of the party, expressed the fears of all the men when he wrote in his journal, "We all agreed the only thing to do was to get out while we could."

The storm persisted into the next day, dumping huge amounts of snow in their path. As they crested a ridge the drifts proved impassible for these men who had never been on the mountain in winter and were ill prepared for the trek. Of the 22 horses in their group, only one—"Old Sorrel"—was able to break through the drifts and provide an opening for their escape.

Lets now pick up the story later that night, after "Old Sorrel" saved their lives. The men climbed into their bedrolls high up on the mountain, hungry, exhausted, wet, very cold, utterly discouraged and a long way from home. They were in over their heads. And now they had spun out two weeks of their eight months and had nothing to show for it. Most of them wanted to give up. They put off talking about what to do until the next morning.



The next morning came. It was time for the moment of truth. The town's branch campus hung on the outcome of what these 15 men would decide. Most of them wanted to quit and head for home. To continue the endeavor meant they would have to return time and time and time again to the top of this mountain to bring the lumber down. They had barely survived the previous day and were not interested in tempting Mother Nature any further. As the conversation heated up, the men taking sides, Neil Bladen, who had been pushing the others to continue, jumped up on a wagon and standing above the rest, full of spit and resolve, cried, "Well go home all you damn tenderfeet; we'll get along without you. We'll get the lumber out ourselves!" Most did head for home, hoping to never see the top of that mountain in winter again.

Bladen and four others stayed on. Over the next days these five men returned to their wagons, buried deep in snow on the mountain, and with great difficulty brought down the first load of lumber.

Their appearance in town with boards in tow ignited a community hungry for education—and the endeavor was afoot. Blacksmiths,

commandeering every piece of scrap iron in town, worked around the clock to fashion new homemade bobsleighs. Women worked at a frenzied pace to make warmer clothing for the workers. A steady stream of food found its way from kitchens to wagons. And the men returned to the mountain.

Soon, women and men were making bricks, one at a time out of cold clay in the dead of winter, men were carving stones from the mountain for the foundation, and families mortgaged their homes to pay teachers' salaries. Neil Bladen and the four who dared to go back up the mountain saved this university. And then other women and men saved it with effort equal to Bladen's in a hundred other ways. This community built this university. You all now rightfully feel some ownership of it.

I will say this about Neil Bladen—as one who has been caught high on a mountain in winter storms myself—it is one thing to walk off a mountain alive after nearly loosing your life. It is altogether another matter to turn around, before your clothing is hardly dry, and walk right back up into the breach.

Why did Neil Bladen and the others risk their lives for this school?

Why did this entire community of miners, farmers and ranchers—who did not need a branch normal school in their community to make a living—go back up the mountain, mortgage their homes, dig clay in the frigid winter earth, carve stones out of frozen mountains, pound nails throughout the summer when they should have been working their farms, and a hundred other things all go back up the mountain?

It's a great question. Why did they do it?

Theodore Roosevelt was the White House's most prolific writer. By my count he wrote and published 39 books, many of them on the West. He described the settlement of the West as "the great epic feat" in the history of America. It was, to him, "a record of men [and women] who greatly dared and greatly did." They faced all odds head on driving wagon trains across plains and mountains, pulling handcarts, burrowing mines, plowing fields, and digging irrigation canals so they could build a community in this dry, lifeless desert on red sand.

We need to try to see all of this through 19th Century eyes—not

our own. This landscape we are so privileged to live in is of incomparable beauty. Tourists come here from all over the world to gaze at it. It is a wonderful thing looking out the window of our air-conditioned cars or hiking along improved trails, with North Face gear and purified water, with energy bars and all variety of prepared, lightweight snacks in the spring and fall or, in summer, early or late in the day when it is not too hot outside. But, it was altogether different to the hardy 19th Century pioneer men and women who had to make a living out in it.

Ebenezer Bryce, for whom Bryce Canyon was named, described the landscape well for all of them who were living off the land: "It is a hell of a place to lose a cow."

The settlement of the West was the great epic feat in the history of America by women and men who greatly dared and greatly did. And the creation of this university is one of the larger-than-life plots in the epic story.

I want to return to the question of why the founders of our university went back up the mountain in such a daring feat in the dead of winter. I

don't believe it was so they could make a better living. They didn't need what they were building to be better farmers, ranchers, miners, blacksmiths or merchants. I have seen the curriculum offered that first term—none of it directly related to their occupations. Not a single class. It was a campus designed to train teachers.

I believe the answer to why is deeply rooted in the American experience that they were so much a part of. The Founders of America, we might say the architects of the American government, saw themselves engaged in a grand experiment. They were creating a society where all people would ultimately be considered equal, protected in their God-given inalienable rights and empowered to govern themselves. It had never been done. All prior attempts to do anything like it failed. And when democracies failed, what followed was scary.

Our founders believed there was only one way self-government could work. The people had to be educated—all of the people. Nothing was more obvious to them. The kind of education that the people would need was well beyond the knowhow required to make a living. It was something different. These early American people, 90% of whom were farmers, had to be skilled in gathering and sorting information, critical thinking, inquiry and analysis in order to be successful, informed voters. Who was going to teach these skills to 18th Century families living off the land?

It was this concern about who was responsible to educate the people for democracy that led John Adams to write into the Massachusetts state Constitution and, I might add, clearly referring to what we now call public and higher education. Adams wrote,



and the state adopted these words: “It shall be the duty of legislators and magistrates in all future periods . . . to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences...[and] to countenance and inculcate the principles of humanity and general benevolence, public and private charity, industry and frugality, honesty...good humour, and all social affections . . .”

This is an education for a people engaged in democracy, not just looking for a job. Thomas Jefferson said, “A people who want to be ignorant and free...want what never was and never will be.” George Washington might have been the least educated of the founders. Yet he so valued education for the next generation of Americans that he made the largest donation ever, up to that point in our history—\$20,000—to a university. (Fun fact: it was the same university that our Lt. Governor, Spencer Cox, graduated from, now known as Washington and Lee University in Virginia.)

If education was required to establish and maintain this new government what was the outcome they hoped for from it? What was the goal of the government itself? Well, 56 of our brightest men answered this question on a very hot and muggy July day in Philadelphia in 1776. The purpose of the American regime, they said, is to protect our “unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Lest we confuse our current-day, common understanding of happiness with the Founders of this nation’s understanding of happiness, let us look to twice-Pulitzer Prize winning author David McCullough, who tells us that happiness to the Founders meant, “education and the love of learning,

the freedom to think for oneself.” This might explain why Jefferson took John Locke’s earlier statement, “life, liberty and estate”—estate being the same as property—and changed it in his draft of the Declaration of Independence to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” He changed it from property to happiness, which is a change from accumulating wealth and things to enjoying an educated life.

How about that: education as the means and education as the ends.

None of my four grandparents got past the 9th grade. My mother, who is here today, grew up on a small farm in Mink Creek, Idaho, where her parents were poor, subsistence farmers living on land that had been homesteaded by Danish emigrants. The family only had a few books when my mother was a child, maybe four or five church books. But she had a library card and she could check out books at a public library that was an hour-and-a-half drive away. She first received books of her own when she was 10—one of them was Heidi. The books she checked out of the library were classics.

It was extremely important to my maternal grandparents that all their children go to college. Even the son who was planning to stay on the farm and had no apparent need, to him anyway, for a formal education was strongly encouraged to go to college.

We just celebrated my mother’s 80th birthday last Saturday. She is a model of this university’s motto: “Learning Lives Forever.” I asked her how many books she has read so far this year and she told me about 75. A few years ago I set a goal to read 50 books in a single year. I didn’t make it. But she more than doubled my goal, reading in excess of two books per week for a year.

Former Librarian of Congress, Daniel Boorstin, said, “trying to plan for the future without a sense of the past is like trying to plant cut flowers.”

What about our roots? What has brought us here today? Why does this country have such a rich history with education? And why did the pioneers in Iron County give so much to establish this university? I believe there are three major reasons. They are separate but inseparable. And as we move forward as a community of learners, it will do us well to remember all three.

First, public education was seen as necessary to build up and maintain a society of people equipped to govern themselves. Our first job as Americans is our civil responsibility—the responsibility of maintaining a government of the people, by the people and for the people. One might think we have reached the level of education in the country where this is no longer a driving concern. Unfortunately this is not the case. Only 58%, just over half, of the eligible voters in America cast ballots in the most recent presidential election. In my age category—of those with a bachelor’s degree—80% voted, a much higher rate of participation. Further, those with a bachelor’s degree report, in survey-after-survey, that they understand important political issues facing our country at much higher rates than those without a college degree.

Second, education helps us acquire the skills necessary to succeed in the marketplace, to be able to make a living sufficient to support self and family. Most of us go to college, seek a bachelor’s degree for career and financial reasons. Interestingly enough, this doesn’t seem to be the leading motivation for the Founders

of this nation or university. But it is an extremely important part of what we do today. Studies continue to reveal that college graduates make substantially more money and have increased job security than those who did not earn a degree.

The third reason for this university is to deliver Thomas Jefferson's promise or, more accurately, the unanimous America's Promise memorialized by the 56 people who signed the Declaration of Independence: that the government would preserve "life liberty and the pursuit of happiness," with happiness meaning—a life of "education and the love of learning, the freedom to think for oneself." To be able to read and understand great literature, appreciate art, enjoy a Shakespeare play and have it inform our lives; to look up at a mountain and understand something of how it was formed, to recognize the name of a wildflower; to understand the economy, or to appreciate people and ideas of other cultures; to engage in a deep, intelligent conversation about important issues of the day; to gather in the Gilbert Great Hall, as hundreds of us did yesterday, and listen to Billy Collins read his poetry—and to be thrilled by it all.

And it works. Current research supports Jefferson's correlation between education and what we will describe as the pursuit of happiness or, as Aristotle might say, "human flourishing." On the whole, researchers have found people with a bachelor's degree, regardless of income level, regardless of employment, report higher levels of happiness, live healthier and longer lives, volunteer more in their community, are more informed voters, are less likely to need public assistance and are less likely



to commit crimes resulting in prison sentences. They also, incidentally, contribute back a higher share of the public tax burden.

This is what we do, all who work here or contribute to this cause in any way. We support our country's form of democracy—a republic, we prepare people for self-sufficient lives and we help them flourish with a life of increased meaning. A custodian or a bookkeeper or an office assistant who works here, may be doing similar tasks as the custodian at a shopping mall, but it is a completely different job because we are delivering on America's Promise. This is what we do.

It was, I believe for this purpose, that in the dead of the winter of 1898, miners, ranchers and farmers, who would never enroll at the branch campus, went back up the mountain risking their lives, and jeopardizing their fortunes. These people who dared greatly inspire.

How do we follow? How do we show our gratitude to these Founders?

Continuing with Theodore Roosevelt, he said, "when we pay homage to the hardy, grim, resolute men [and women] who, with incredible toil and risk, laid deep the

foundations of the civilization that we inherit, let us steadily remember that the only homage that counts is the homage of deeds." These founders of our community and university, "...should be an inspiration and appeal, summoning us to show that we too have courage and strength; that we too are ready to dare greatly..."

If, as librarian Boorstin says, flowers need roots to grow, it is also true, as our students who work on our grounds crew can attest, that even the most beautiful garden doesn't tend itself; it needs constant nourishing. Today we need to dare greatly, for all the same reasons, just as much as the Founders greatly dared and greatly did. We are as important today as they were in their day.

I believe that, usually, the best vision for a university is found already with the people there, not brought in by someone new. As I moved through my 100-Day Listening Tour last spring and then worked my notes and thoughts over the summer I found so many things to focus on—opportunities and challenges, including growth, accreditation, general education, our new strategic plan, future buildings, and capital campaigns. All of these, and many more, are important. But for a driving initiative, that undergirds and overarches all the rest, I would like to focus my energy on one thing, and I invite all of you to join in the effort.

First let me say, this is a spectacular university with more national prestige than local clout. U.S. News and World Report just released new rankings this week and moved SUU from the 71st to the 58th best regional university, out of 756 public and private regional universities in the west. This places us at the 92nd percentile. One of the reasons for our national stature is the

increasing graduation rate that those of you already here have achieved.

Over the past five years Southern Utah University's student graduation rate has increased an astonishing 47%, from 36 to 53. If we focus on this strength—of helping students not merely enroll but complete their education, start their careers and pursue their dreams—I am confident we will be able to reach a 70% completion rate, on time. This will further distinguish SUU among the best public universities in the country. It will be a better rate of student success than any public university within 13 Western States. And the primary beneficiaries will be our students. And when they are succeeding, we are succeeding.

In order to increase our graduation rate we will need to continue going back up the mountain. It took considerable effort for this university to go from 36% to 53%. It will take more of the same to go from 53 to 70.

This will require us to take a holistic approach. It will require us to chisel away at the siloes that have been built up unintentionally all across our university. In order to reach this goal I invite all of you here to join in.

I ask our exceptional faculty to go with us back up the mountain. You have distinguished yourselves with excellent credentials, teaching, research and publications. You own the education here. Please imagine new and creative ways to draw your students in, reinvent the way we deliver general education, and become more collaborative among disciplines. If we are to produce students who are liberally trained, then we should be liberal in our methods—by this I mean less siloed and more integrated in courses among the various

disciplines, using new best practices. The essential learning outcomes are not tied to any one discipline. Here is an exciting idea. Beginning next fall eight faculty members from as many departments will be teaching a cohort of 50 students in what will essentially be one 33-credit class spanning the full academic year. It will have every general education class required for graduation, completely integrated together, plus a travel experience to boot. How fun is that?

Provost Brad Cook is offering to all faculty members one course per year, of your choosing, to test new teaching ideas and methods—and know that if doesn't work the course evaluations will not be held against you. Please take advantage of this. We don't have a research and development department—the entire university should be our R&D.

I ask our dedicated staff members to go with us back up the mountain. You are highly skilled and provide a wonderful service to this university and our students. I think Vice President Marvin Dodge's least favorite line might be, "Well, that's the way we've always done it." Change is not a virtue, per se, but reevaluating what we do with an eye to find more efficient and enjoyable and effective processes is a virtue.

And remember: we have more opportunities to help students persist to graduation that we think. You might have a job in a hidden corner of a hidden building somewhere down a hidden sidewalk. Still, you are part of delivering on America's Promise to our students. I have told this story before. But a friend of mine retired after 30+ years as a custodian—at my last College. We added up the number of students he had a chance to engage

with over the course of his career and it exceeded 3,000. That's a lot of students that he hired, trained or supervised. What an opportunity to mentor and encourage. And what if you only have an opportunity to engage with a small few each year—take it! Be wonderful for somebody.

For those who don't directly interact with students as part of our assignments—first, let's do our jobs as well as we can; and second, seek out opportunities as we walk the sidewalks and halls to be aware of students we pass, smile and greet them. One of the keys to helping students persist to graduation is found in simply helping them feel connected with others.

I ask our bright students to go with us back up the mountain. Our job is to give you all the opportunities we can—your job is to take these opportunities and run with them. Be amazing!

The most significant person in my undergraduate experience might have been a fellow student by the name of De Ringle. She was a junior or senior when I started university life as a freshman. She went out of her way to invite me to join a student leadership committee she served on. That one invitation, and then her continual kindness and encouragement was the start of something very special for me and ended up changing my life. That was the most transformative year for me, ever. I hadn't seen De since my college days, until the week before school started here just last month. She came to SUU Freshman Orientation with her daughter to drop her off and she found me and asked if I remembered her. She apparently had no idea how much of a blessing she was to me and I had a difficult time holding back my tears as I took the opportunity to tell her how much her

small acts of kindness meant to me.

De was amazing to me. She reached out. Students: please reach out to others, and toward your own ambitions. This is your life. Go for it!

I ask the members of our community and alumni to go with us back up the mountain. We cannot succeed without your help. It was this community that gave our university life and it will be this community that will sustain it and help us thrive. There are so many ways you can be helpful, including supporting our students' performances, employing them, mentoring them, encouraging their attendance here, and donating needed funds for scholarships, programs and buildings. Think about what you can do.

As a side, you might be interested to know that the State used to provide a full 70% of the cost of educating our students here. Now they provide less than half of the cost. Tuition and donations cover the rest.

In conclusion, as we go back up the mountain together, as faculty, staff, students and community members, there will be storms in our path, but we will bring home the lumber.



We will grow in a manner that contributes to the quality experience here. We will deliver an even more innovative and relevant education. We will lead students to rates of success that no other public school in our region can match. And, finally, our America will be better because of what we do.

I want to tell you how grateful I am to be associated with each of you. I have developed a deep love for this university. Kathy and I have been made to feel so welcome. Thank you. Please be patient with me, I still make mistakes, and I am still listening and still learning. It is such an honor to help deliver on America's Promise. And as we do, please dare greatly, as our founders did. And we will greatly do. Thank you.