

BILL DANFORTH'S REMARKS
To WU Planning Group May 8, 2010

I believe that in planning for our Washington University, we have to ask ourselves why we love it and why we work for it. Of course, we cannot forget that the nuts and bolts must be well thought through, practical, and realistic. But without a dream and without aspiring for something great, our work may be pedestrian. David Blasingame asked me to say something about the dream.

We all express dreams in our own ways.

One week ago I watched the christening of my youngest great granddaughter. As I watched this infant with her young parents go through an ancient ritual, I could see, or imagine I saw, my great granddaughter as a five-year-old, and then a young woman in a wedding dress, and then as a mother with young children, then as a grandmother, and finally as an old lady stooped and moving with halting steps. And I thought of how her moral decisions would affect her life, her happiness, and who she would become.

That is just the way my mind works, and that is the way I look at Washington University.

Some years ago I tried to put these kinds of thoughts together.

Remarks for Reunion Classes: May 17, 1986

...One of the things any Chancellor sees is the enormous effort that goes into Washington University. We aren't the first to work for the institution. Sometimes, when I walk though the quadrangle at night, I think of the enormous energy and treasure that it has taken to bring us this far. I try to commune with the campus and feel the spirit of those who have walked the same brick paths in earlier years. I think of the vision and generosity of spirit it took to conceive a great university located in the Midwest. I think of young faculty bringing their dreams to St. Louis, pouring their lives into Washington University and into the teaching of students year after year through booms and depressions, war and peace, and then finally leaving in old age, sometimes in the past with inadequate pensions, but with the satisfaction of knowing that they have influenced generations of young Americans and young people from other lands. I think of the involvement of their families — Betty Compton bringing dinner to Arthur and passing it through the basement window in Eads Hall so that he could concentrate on understanding the mysteries of the physical universe. I can feel the heartbreak of younger faculty who did not make the tenure cut and leave perhaps for another kind of life for which they are ill-prepared.

I think of students entering as immature 18-year-olds, some leaving as immature 22-year-olds, but more leaving after having acquired the beginnings of wisdom and understanding. I think of young people walking absentmindedly over the bricks, intoxicated with ideas that suddenly connect and open a whole new vision of the world. I can imagine the laughter, the play, the blossoming of love in the springtime and the gradual growth in the acquisition of a grander vision of what one is and what one might

become. I think of the many springs in which these young people have officially joined the educated company of men and women in a ceremony with roots stretching back 800 years and stretching on into the future, I hope forever — at least, if we don't goof it up.

Why do we pour so much work and treasure into Washington University? How does it all come about? We each have our ideals and our aspirations, but we know that if we keep them to ourselves, they will be insubstantial and fade into the mists with our own lives. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime. Therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing that is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history. Therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we must be saved by love.

We want to freeze our ideals into reality, so that they can be preserved and come alive in other people, in other times. We hope young people of the future can have our opportunities or, better yet, enhanced opportunities. The way to do that is through an institution that can embody our ideals along with knowledge and wisdom so as to be ever ready for each new faculty member and freshman student.

Universities are a promising vehicle. For all of their lack of organization and even lack of seeming coherence, for all their mistakes and occasionally foolish ideologies, they endure. Clark Kerr said that he was able to find 66 institutions of 350 years ago that are still alive today: the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the Parliament of Iceland, the Parliament of the Isle of Man, and 62 universities.

Universities endure, I believe, because they promise hope and renewal, two perennial human needs. It seems to me that universities are to our civilization what the great Gothic cathedrals were to the late Middle Ages. They are the embodiment of the aspirations and hopes of our more secular, skeptical, and technical society — in their ways, as beautiful as the cathedrals of Chartres or Reims, and, we can hope, more utilitarian.

We work for Washington University because it is here, because someone else started it and gave us the opportunity to join in its unfinished work. Our task will always be unfinished because, as Toynbee said, "Civilization is a movement and not a condition; a voyage and not a harbor." We work because Washington University makes special contributions to the world in, for example: biomedical research, literature, space sciences, political economy, computer science, etc., etc. In these and other areas, we are near or even at one of the pinnacles of human endeavor. We support our institution because some of us feel a special responsibility for an institution in the Midwest and believe a great university makes a special contribution to the flow of bright young people and to the scientific, cultural, and technical life of the world.

Especially we support Washington University because it embodies our ideals and aspirations.

Let me finish with a quote from Diane Ravitch in a recent book called: *The Troubled Crusade: American Education 1945-1980*:

In the crusade against ignorance, there have been no easy victories, but no lasting defeats. Those who have labored on behalf of American education have seen so many barriers scaled, so much hatred dispelled, so many possibilities remaining to provide the basis for future reconciliation....If it seems naively American to put so much stock in schools, colleges, universities, and the endless prospect of self-improvement and social improvement, it is an admirable and, perhaps, even a noble flaw.