

## Inaugural Address

Good morning, trustees, family, alumni, friends, and colleagues. It is a very good morning. I feel as I did when I learned I was named President of this great institution. Excited – yes! But, very humble. Humble – that’s what I felt then and I feel it now. It feels good to be the 13th President of Tougaloo College. 13 is a good number. My research tells me that the Egyptians regarded 13 as lucky as did the Chinese, and according to its original meaning, it is transformation. Well, I don’t necessarily believe in luck. I was taught that luck is simply preparation meeting opportunity. However, I do believe in the spirit of transformation. I believe in blessings and today as I lead Tougaloo College, I need blessings of the supernatural kind – because our aim is to bring prosperity to this place. God has given us a vision of prosperity. I believe like the prophet, Isaiah, God has a plan for us – a plan of freedom and of hope. 134 years after its founding, Tougaloo College still stands as a testament of the spirit that has withstood the tests of time, challenges, place and still stands as the continued testament of the promise of God’s grace. And it is He who has ordered it to be that all of us are gathered at such a time as this to carry out His work on earth.

I want to acknowledge the presence of my family. They have lifted me up and supported me all the days of my life. Everything I needed to know to be successful in life, I learned from them and in the Sunday school of the Mt. Wade Missionary Baptist Church, wrapped securely in a blanket of love, encouragement, discipline and support. I am sure my mother, as usual, is wondering when I was presented – who are they talking about. My father would have written the script himself, he is beaming and saying – that’s my baby girl. I want to say to my father today, thank you for taking the time to teach me, mold me into the person I am today. From you, I learned so very much about courage, giving, sharing, being the best I can, compassion and strength of character. This day is definitely your day too. To my sisters and brothers, thank you for making me tough, strong, loving and faith filled. (My brother, Dub, hitting me on the head with a hammer at a young age, gave me the great resilience that continues to serve me well.) I do have a large family – but there are still many at Mt. Wade today as they gather for Sunday morning worship, I know I am lifted up in their prayers. My husband, Marvin, (my ROCK) has traveled the Tougaloo journey with me for 32 years. I married him as a student here at Tougaloo College. Our sons, Maurice and Marcellus – Tougaloo educated men – (one is still here) – our grandchildren, Marsei, Emani, Liyah.

My many colleagues and friends – thank you for sharing this day with me. I see each of you. And to the administration, faculty, staff and students, I appreciate you more than any words could convey. You walk this journey daily with me. Your commitment and dedication give me the buoyancy to lead with a smile and a heart filled with love.

Thank you, my fellow alumni for your continued and growing support. And to the Board of Trustees – thank you. There is no finer group of committed individuals than those on the Tougaloo College Board of Trustees. I appreciate and value your confidence, your support and your commitment to Tougaloo College. Thank you for allowing me to travel this extraordinary journey in service to this very special place. There is no place I'd rather be than here at Tougaloo College. There is no calling more noble – no goal more worthy – no struggle more deserving of my efforts – than serving and leading Tougaloo College.

Home is where the heart is. Tougaloo College is home for me. Welcome to my Home. **I am the Daughter of the Soil.**

A friend from Wellesley College shared this Unitarian prayer with me and it fits so perfectly with how I see Tougaloo.

*"Come into the place of peace and let the silence heal your spirit. Come into the place of memory and let its history warm your soul. Come into this place and let its vision change your heart."*

Come with me this day into Tougaloo College. Sink deeply into the soil of these hallowed grounds and be transformed.

Over thirty years ago, I came here in search of knowledge and truth. Fueled with the teachings and enduring values of my parents and my own community village, Tougaloo College helped to shape, foster and develop more fully these values, becoming an extension of my community village. As I sat under the shade of the large oak trees, (my favorite was in front of Beard Hall) dripping with Spanish moss, pondering the thoughts of Neitche, the theories of Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung or William James, swaying between the hemispheres of my brain to understand MacBeth, I was transformed within the magical spirit of this environment. Who could have imagined that she would become the 13th President? Who could have imagined that the life of a future of the 13th President was taking form within the little girl from the village of Mt. Wade? Certainly not !!

As I stand here today now blanketed within the spirits of the ancestors, I can see them smiling, I can even hear them singing. Is it my imagination that they are chanting even – the **Daughter of the Soil** has arrived?

I look across to the Wilder Mansion, the original structure (the Master's House) that was here when the American Missionary Association founded this institution in 1869. Similarly, when H. S. Beals arrived on October 12, 1869 to take charge of the Tougaloo Project, as it was called, for the AMA, the Mansion needed repairs. The Mansion is currently undergoing restoration. It is from within the Mansion that the

President lived and worked, students attended classes and had their meals and at one time, also slept. We stand on the fields that were plowed and where the seeds were planted for the harvest. The Historic Woodworth Chapel is to my left, Berkshire Cottage is at my back and the New Women's Dormitory is to my right. This is indeed the place Where History Meets the Future. Like the convergence of the two brooks, our past and present form the fork and from the fork, we are shape and chart our future.

I walk the hall of the Blackmon Administration Building where the pictures of my predecessors hang for this inaugural occasion. I stare – studying closely the faces of all of my predecessors, and consider how they felt and what their thoughts were when they took the reins of leadership. I feel a kinship with each of them – though none look like me. They were all men – rather stern looking ones. They were all white males until Dr. George Owens took charge in 1964. And today I am honored to pay homage to their leadership for each made a significant contribution to laying the foundation upon which I am now called to build. Thank you J. K. Nutting, Stanley Pope, Frank G. Woodworth, William Trumbull Holmes, Harold C. Warren, Judson L. Cross, Samuel C. Kincheloe, A. D. Beittel, George A. Owens, J. Herman Blake, Adib A. Shakir, and Joe A. Lee. Owens, Blake, Shakir and Lee are still living. And Dr. Shakir and Dr. Lee are here with us. I appreciate your presence. I also recognize Dr. Edgar Smith, former Interim President, who also serves as Senior Advisor to the President. The words of Robert Frost appropriately describe my thoughts:

*Much as I own I owe,  
The passers of the past  
Because their to and fro  
Has cut this road to last.*

As in the Book of Hosea, our Founders came to plant goodness, harvest the fruit of loyalty and plow the new ground of knowledge. We are the fruits of this labor – the keepers of the goodness, loyalty and knowledge – called to advance their vision.

I try to imagine what our founders faced when they envisioned establishing an institution to educate the recently freed slaves. How bold must have been the vision! From the basin of nothing, they were able to see the well of greatness. They saw what a College could be. Without question, their aim was high and their vision was bold. One can imagine the conditions of Mississippi 134 years ago and a place called the Boddie Plantation. A place fallen to despair because of neglect by the Master, who became disillusioned by financial pressures and the disappointment of being abandoned by his fiancée – the very one for whom he was building the Mansion. The environment they forged into was not Cambridge,

New York City or Chicago. It was Tougaloo, Mississippi. Yet they aimed high and they fearlessly developed a dream grounded in hope. Their hope and their vision continue to inspire us today.

For from the ruins of an old plantation that once served to oppress and shackle the bodies, minds and spirits of our African American people now stands this Tougaloo College, an oasis of intellectual freedom and social progress. We can never forget it was here at Tougaloo College that the strategies for social justice and freedom were devised and crafted and implemented. What happened here during the Civil Rights Era changed the political, social and economic fabric of the state, nation and the world.

Our legacy is deep, rich and strong. Thus, our hope and vision for the future must reflect continuity with our past.

No institution, however, can live solely on its past, no matter how great and praiseworthy that past may be. If reflection of the past leads us to stimulation of our minds for the future, then the effort in the reflection is laudable. If it lulls us to complacent inactivity, then it is fatal. While valuing our past, we must live our beliefs by continually reexamining them.

Our legacy gives flight to our dreams and vision of education in this 21st century learning environment.

Our vision for Tougaloo College is clear. We want Tougaloo College to lead in the generation of new knowledge, in scholarship, service and research. We want Tougaloo College to be an intellectual community that also recognizes and practices social responsibility. An intellectual community must be refreshed and challenged by new scholarship or it will quickly grow dull.

Today, the standards of excellence our scholarship must meet are global. We may create locally but we must excel globally. We understand that the landscape of higher education is constantly evolving, bringing about challenges and opportunities to all colleges and universities. There are issues of adequate funding that affect all institutions today - accountability, assessment and technology. We are challenged to examine the nature and quality of our curricula today to prepare young people for a changing world and global economy. We cannot develop the leadership we need for global change if we fail to educate our students about the global context of their life and work. Even if they choose to remain in Tougaloo, Mississippi, their lives and their work will be impacted by global change.

Tougaloo's strength has always derived from the quality of our academic programs. And we want the quality of our academic programs to stand up against the top liberal arts colleges in the nation. The academic investments we make cannot simply reflect history and habit. They must be driven by intellectual opportunity and productivity.

Our vision is grounded in confidence and hope. Our hope is in the mission of a liberal arts institution that gives our students balance as they enter a world that can quickly disorient the most sure-footed. Our vision arises out of the fabric of the community and our particular historical context. It is the vision that inspires us to reach, to dream, to stretch and in so doing, to release our better angels that can give us the grace to achieve excellence against all odds. We will not waiver in our mission and our vision because ours is about a higher purpose, a power greater than ourselves, greater than this particular time, and this particular place.

In the words of Alfred North Whitehead, “Those societies which cannot combine reverence to their symbols with freedom of revision must ultimately decay either from anarchy or from the slow atrophy of life stifled by shadows.” We must grapple with new technologies, new workplace demands and new kinds of students. We must rethink our traditional ways of teaching and even organizing our disciplines. We must assure ourselves that our pedagogy focuses on our students, is always thoughtful, always progressing and is scholarly. We must field and redesign curricula that are innovative, inviting and demanding at the same time. We must incorporate new technologies into our curricula and embrace this transformation by technology without losing sight of our fundamental values. As educators and leaders today, we must prepare our students to enter a world that is increasingly defined by technological changes, shifting work patterns, cultural diversity, environmental fragility and new global perspectives.

Tougaloo College is about students – students learning – developing good citizens and leaders. It is about scholarship and we must now be about innovation. A College is always about the future. We educate students in preparation for the rest of their lives. We do research that advances human knowledge and provide the basis for strong economies and improved quality of life in the future. We must never become so engaged with today’s challenges that we fail to position the College for the success of the next generation.

We must ensure that all our curricula effectively prepare our students for leadership. We will need to make some changes. But, it is no surprise that many of the characteristics today’s students will need for success are the same as they always have been: the ability to think critically, to write clearly, to reason logically and quantitatively, to have an appreciation of history and culture and to transmute all of these into an essential humanity.

Like the enduring values learned from my parents, Tougaloo College, as a liberal arts institution, is also about enduring values. It teaches the ability to move into the future. It allows us to recognize and survive the ephemeral, to adapt to change and to create a future.

Regardless of the challenges for higher education today, there will always be a place for the kind of education that a Tougaloo College offers – an education based on a close community, a sense of place, great teaching and challenge. We want to produce students who are liberally educated, who are good citizens, who have examined their values and who want to make a contribution to the world. We want to produce the people who will have the “next new idea” and will lead us into the future.

Without question, our highest priority is sustained and enhanced academic excellence and intellectual rigor. This level of quality and excellence demands adequate resources: competent, caring, qualified faculty, scholarships for academically talented and socially responsible students, facilities to sustain an environment conducive to students’ matriculation, technology, and advances library resources. We are equally as committed to fiscal responsibility, stability and sustainability to support a high quality academic environment.

Our work today is not for the next three years but we are laying the foundation for the next 100 years.

As leaders, we must always look forward. We can’t be overly concerned if our efforts will reap benefits during our time. We must build for the future. Like our founders, we too must plant goodness.

Our greatest resources are our people and our land. We must draw on our historical strength of educational excellence to fashion new academic alliances that will reinforce the continuing relevance of our mission. The intangible qualities that define this very distinctive College – natural setting, historic place, enduring/nurturing community, respect for the individual, cultural enrichment, support of achievement – external opportunity must be more widely marketed.

Tougaloo College is a community of learning, subject to continued self-examination and renewal. We are traditional because we remain committed to preserve our legacy and give continuity to learning and culture, while seeking innovative ways to incorporate basic and new knowledge into our research, service and teaching. And in doing so, we reach beyond the work of our founders – beyond the span of any single individual to become the collective work of generations.

In the words of Tennyson, I am a part of all I have met, though much is taken, much abide; that which we are, we are one equal temper of heroic hearts. In closing, I draw from Romans 3:12 - *“the night is far spent, the day is at hand, let us therefore cast off the works of the darkness and let us put on the armour of light”*.

Hello to the leadership for a new era.