

What happens when a deferred dream is realized?

Presented by Regent Elridge W. McMillan, University System of Georgia Board of Regents, during the Honors Day Convocation at Albany State University on March 28, 2008.

Thank you, President Freeman, for that fine introduction.

It is my great pleasure to be here with you today in celebration of Albany State University's Honors Day.

As a member of the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents, I am always pleased to visit one of our campuses and to meet the students, faculty, staff and administrators who help to make our University System an example of national educational excellence and pride. I commend you!

I have served on the Board of Regents for over 30 years, having been initially appointed by Governor George Busbee in 1975, long before most of you were born.

So, for nearly half of my life, I have worked with others to build upon the strengths of Georgia's public institutions of higher education.

During these years, I have had the opportunity to work closely with dozens of our System's presidents, and I greatly respect their commitment, not only to their respective institutions, students, staff and faculty, and communities, but to the overarching mission that guides our system-wide efforts.

Under President Freeman's leadership, Albany State continues to be one of our premier institutions whose graduates contribute to our region as professionals in an array of areas including education, business and healthcare.

In recent weeks, we have witnessed the transition of two former Albany State University Presidents: Dr. Charles Hayes, who served from 1969 to 1980, and Dr. Billy Black, who served from 1981 to 1996. Both were tireless advocates for this university. Their legacies will be forever present in our hearts, and their great work is evidenced all around us.

I was honored to work with both of them.

I will especially miss Dr. Black, who served as your president for 15 of my nearly 33 years as a member of the Board of Regents. Under his leadership, Albany State built upon its rich legacy while laying the foundation to become a great university.

Albany State is indeed a great university. Its mission to educate students to become outstanding contributors to society is notable and attractive to an increasingly diverse student body – a student body determined to improve their lives by preparing themselves for the world of work and beyond.

Today we are here to recognize the most important members of the Albany State University community – the students, and more specifically, students who have distinguished themselves academically – our honor students.

You are our most valuable asset. You carry our hopes and our dreams. You are our future political leaders, educators, entrepreneurs, physicians and lawyers.

We rely on you, just as previous generations relied on your parents, to commit yourself to the work of our nation, to build upon the best of our country and transform our challenges into opportunities for growth.

As I prepared my remarks, I reflected on the challenges earlier generations, including my own, faced that are different from your own.

In light of today's theme, "Honors Realized: A Celebration of Excellence in Academic Achievement," my reflections led me to a question: What happens when a deferred dream is realized?

The phrase "a dream deferred" is one that most of you recognize. In the first stanza of his famous poem "A Dream Deferred," Langston Hughes asks:

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up?
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?

"A dream deferred" is a powerful metaphor for the twentieth century African American experience. Published in 1951, Hughes captures the angst of African Americans whose aspirations were held captive by the harsh realities of a racially polarized nation.

Yet in the midst of the visible and invisible barriers, African Americans did not stop dreaming. At various moments in our history, as Americans we have resisted the temptation to become pessimistic or apathetic. Instead, whatever the circumstance, we have believed in and dreamed of a better day.

In his poem, Langston Hughes described dreams as deferred, or postponed, rather than destroyed. Dreams, as he described them, were simply delayed, waiting for daylight to be transformed from the imagined to reality.

Your lives are full of real opportunities – opportunities that you have a responsibility to seize. The world awaits you and your talents.

Do not limit your aspirations based upon self-doubt or the doubtfulness of others. Those who reject doubt and fear often transcend their most audacious dreams. Instead, I encourage you to dream big and not to be afraid to act upon them.

The Albany State University motto – “Potential. Realized.” – and your Honors Day theme – “Honors. Realized.” – affirm that you should not relegate your dreams to deferred status. Instead, they represent immediate possibilities for your life.

So, I have simply extended Hughes’ profound question by asking, “What happens when a deferred dream is realized?”

What happens? You happen. Not by accident. Not as a result of good fortune or luck. But as a result of access to good schools with good teachers, parents who loved you enough to demand that you do better than what you thought was your best, and your determined tenacity to meet every challenge.

As I stand before you today, each of you – individually and collectively – is the answer to my question. You are a deferred dream realized, not only your dreams for yourself, but others’ dreams for you: your parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, your elementary school teachers, your high school principal, your professors here at Albany State University.

You are the physical evidence of the power of a dream. You are living testimonies of our abiding faith that dreams expand our secret aspirations and convince us of their transformative power.

As honor students you have demonstrated your commitment to academic excellence and have earned membership to an elite group of fellow students; however, your status as an honor student demands that you not only continue to raise the academic bar, but that you encourage others to do so as well. Offer to tutor a struggling classmate, form a study group, and become involved with your community. Share your time and talents. “To whom much is given, much is required.”

In the final paragraph of his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela writes:

I have walked that long road to freedom.
I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way.

But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb.

I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come.

But I can rest only for a moment, for with freedom comes responsibilities, and I dare not linger for my long walk is not yet ended.

Like Mandela, today we have taken a moment from our ceaseless climbing “to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista...to look back on the distance (we) have come.”

To paraphrase a popular cliché, “Academic excellence is not a destination; it is a journey.”

Your achievement deserves our recognition; however, your hard work has just begun. You have much good work to do in the classroom, in your communities, in our state and in our nation.

I know you are prepared for the task.

I remind you of how important it is to nurture your dreams, to reflect upon them and to be open to their potential to strengthen and motivate you and others through you.

In closing, I leave you with another poem by Langston Hughes entitled “I Dream A World” that describes my dream for all of us.

I dream a world where man
No other man will scorn,

Where love will bless the earth
And peace its paths adorn.

I dream a world where all
Will know sweet freedom’s way,

Where greed no longer saps the soul
Nor avarice blights our day.

A world I dream where black or white,
Whatever race you be,

Will share the bounties of the earth
And every man is free,

Where wretchedness will hang its head
And joy, like a pearl,

Attends the needs of all mankind –
Of such I dream, my world!