Building Our Castles in the Air
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Achievement, Endeavor and Hope

The Investiture of
President Davies

April 10, 2015

Thank you all for being here today to celebrate our university, Murray State, a premier and nationally recognized student-centered university.

Before I begin, I want to thank all of you who worked on the numerous and important activities that occurred over the last several days, today and the many more to come. As eloquently stated by Bob Valentine in *The Murray State News* — the finest university newspaper — there are 972 award ceremonies, 527 new officer elections, 342 proposals for marriage (and 189 acceptances), 257 end-of-year banquets, 23 spring formals, 84 annual lectures, three presidential crowd surfings, two Senior Breakfaests, one Investiture, one Commencement ceremony and a partridge in a pear tree.

Each one of these events is special, unique and supports the Murray State ethic of being student-centered and furthering our proud traditions, which truly sets us apart. Therefore, to the members of the Investiture Committee, to faculty and staff serving on numerous other committees, to our student leaders, to our fantastic student musicians, to our BSTs and grounds crew keeping our campus beautiful, thank you for making these events special and memorable for all involved. And to all who had parking disturbances because of today’s activities, I sincerely apologize. Again, thank you to all!

We join today to celebrate the significant achievements and traditions of Murray State, as well as to acknowledge what we will accomplish together in the years to come.

Please indulge me as I introduce some of the special people who join us today. First, I would like to thank my father for being here and offering his kind words and support.

Forrest Pogue, in writing about General George Marshall, wrote, “I believe his mother played a determining part in developing in her son his ideal of integrity, fair play, ambition and a desire to succeed.” I know my mother instilled in me those values, in addition to the value of service to others and sense of compassion as the highest of all virtues. Please welcome my mother, Sharon Davies. Thank you, Mom.

My sister, Jenny Hoy, also joins us today. Jenny is recognized as one of the top middle school teachers in the state of Nevada and has inspired many students to reach their dreams and aspirations. Most importantly, displayed proudly in her classroom, is a 10-foot banner promoting Murray State! And one of her students recently contacted me directly about attending Murray State! Joining her today is her husband, Mike Hoy, and their daughter, Jayme.
My aunt and uncle, Fred and Becky Davies, and their daughter and my cousin, Susan, and her husband, Allen

As the poem and saying goes,

“Make new friends but keep the old;
Those are silver, these are gold.”

I would like to introduce some of my friends who have stood with me for a long time and helped me along my journey, as well as several new friends.

Paul and Jeannie Page (University of Nevada). I must personally thank Paul as he took a risk on hiring me and giving me my first professional opportunity in higher education. Then it was through his mentorship, leadership and “Conferences at the Gold and Silver” where he challenged me to aspire to become a university president.

Bobby Ratchford (representing our time at Boise State University)

Kathleen and Andy Heckman, their son, Drew, and daughter, Madeline (University at Buffalo)

Donna and Wally Putt, along with Jeff Samuels (Indiana University of Pennsylvania)

Steve Adkison (Eastern Oregon University)

Some of my new friends and colleagues, I wish to highlight:

Honorable Governor Beshear, Chairperson Waterfield and other members of the platform party. Thank you for participating in today’s events.

Murray State’s 6th President – Dr. Deno Curris
Murray State’s 9th President – Dr. Kern Alexander and his wife, Elizabeth
Murray State’s 12th President – Dr. Tim Miller and his wife, Patsy

I am also honored to have presidents of:

Eastern Kentucky, Michael Benson
Henderson Community College, Kristin Williams
Hopkinsville Community College, Jay Allen
Madisonville Community College, Judith Rhoads, and
West Kentucky Community and Technical College, Barbara Veazey

And member of the CPE board of directors, Mr. Dan Flannigan.

I also want to acknowledge and thank the current regents and many former regents, as well as the MSU Foundation Board of Trustees members who are here today for their support and leadership
that they provide our university. Thank you all for being here and a part of this tradition and honoring of our university.

The prolific and international award-winning writer, Janice Holt Giles, in describing her move to Kentucky wrote, “It is the land we had not come to yet — that far place of dreams where meadows were fair, forests were noble, streams were overflowing. It was always the land beyond — over another mountain, across another rolling river. It was the land God made just right and put in exactly the right place.” Indeed, I must say my family and I agree that Kentucky, especially West Kentucky, is made just right and is exactly the right place for us. West Kentucky, like its rivers, is the confluence of southern hospitality and family values, ambition and hard work, idealism and reality, honesty and friendship, and meeting challenges and instilling hope. It is all that my family and I had hoped for. We are proud to be here, to be in the “finest place we will ever know.” Many of you have met my family, but please let me acknowledge them now with my deepest gratitude and love.

Please welcome my wife, Cindy. It is her strength and encouragement that provides me energy and drive. It is her ability to say the right thing at the right time to bring clarity and focus to times of ambiguity. Her insight erases doubts and provides for clear paths. Thank you Cindy. And, do I dare say, my favorite daughter, Katie. She too provides me the strength to continue on my path and attain those goals I have set. It is her job in the family to always make sure I am grounded, to say the quick word that will humble me and bring me back down to earth. She, too, serves as an inspiration for me as she is bright, idealistic and wants to change the world. And she is always quick to give me important advice. Just like this morning when I asked her, “What tie should I wear?” She pondered, thought, looked at my selection, and said, “Go with the blue and gold one.” In five years, she will be a freshman here at Murray State, and I am sure she will still be telling me, as her president, what to do.

Again, thank you all for being here at this special time — a time in which we marvel in the history, traditions and future of Murray State. Through honoring the successes of our distinguished faculty, staff and alumni, breaking ground for new buildings and maintaining rich traditions — all are examples of why Murray State is the “University of Choice” for our students, our faculty, our staff and our community.

In thinking about today’s occasion and framing my thoughts, I contemplated about what to say that would, hopefully, be profound, personal and lasting, and maybe even encouraging. To that end, let me start with a personal story.

My dad and I share a love of sports — the thrill of competition, the essence of teamwork, the value of fair play. One of my treasured activities growing up, from my earliest of memories, was playing catch with my dad. It was our ritual to do this nearly every evening when he got home from work. It was during this time, as we tossed the baseball to one another, hearing the pop of leather on leather, we would talk and listen to each other. It was our time. Nothing else mattered and nothing could intervene during this time of ours, and I learned many life lessons during this ritual.
On one particularly hot July day during our game of catch following my freshman year in high school, my dad started talking about setting life goals and my future. I replied, being a typical teenager, that I would have time for that later and burned a fastball into his mitt. After dinner that night, what I thought was out of the blue, my father handed me a tattered copy of Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* and said it was time for me to read it. I remember thinking why would I need to read this old book and why, on that particular day, he gave it to me and, indeed, why would I need to read this book during summer break!

The next day, while being a loyal son, I was also a teenager; therefore, I put off starting the book. I played baseball with my friends, rode along the Truckee River on our bikes and took in other summer activities befitting a 15-year-old boy. That night, my father came home and we conducted our ritual of playing catch. He asked me between tosses what I thought of *Walden* — most likely knowing that I hadn’t even opened it. As my daughter would say, “Busted.” I started to answer with a feeble attempt to explain why I didn’t, but I knew it was no use and just said, “No, not yet.” He peered at me, threw a knuckle ball knowing that I couldn’t catch it and laughed and said, tonight would be a good time to start, and that ended our session.

Again, being the loyal son that I am, I began reading *Walden* that evening. After reading it that summer, I had more questions than answers. As Dad and I continued our daily game of catch, with each pop of ball hitting leather we shared and talked more and more about *Walden*. Incrementally, I began to understand why Dad asked me to read it and with each discussion Thoreau’s words became more alive and relevant. As I think about my own life, I realized that Dad’s suggestion of reading *Walden* was not an aimless task; rather it was a message that only a father can give his son about thinking, planning, feeling and turning thoughts into action. And, as Dad and I discussed, the latter is the most important. It is not enough to have idealistic images and keeping those as one’s potential; instead, the value is how to bring those thoughts to action and create kinetic energy and lasting change.

To this day, the words of Thoreau echo in my mind with the same exact and distinct pop and snap of the ball hitting a mitt on a summer day. It pierces the ear with a familiarity and calling, a beacon of pride and symbol of purity and unabashed commitment to excellence and fairness. One should examine life not through the lens of listing one’s accomplishments, but by seeking what was created because of those efforts.

My purpose of this reminiscence today is not to relive a childhood memory; but, rather, to put in context my thoughts and perhaps provide a frame for our collective vision for our university.

Murray State University is a living example of one of my favorite passages of Thoreau when he wrote in the conclusion of *Walden* the following:

“I learned this, at least, by my experiment: that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. He will put some things behind, will pass an invisible boundary; new, universal and more liberal laws will begin to establish themselves around and within him; or the old laws be expanded and interpreted in his favor in a more liberal sense, and he will live with the license of a higher order of beings. In proportion as he simplifies his life, the laws of the
universe will appear less complex, and solitude will not be solitude, nor poverty poverty, nor weakness weakness. If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

We need to build our castles in the air. We must set high goals, be ambitious, be bold and not settle for mediocrity. In setting these ambitious goals, we must set the foundations to support our individual castles to ensure and create the trajectory toward the realization of our collective and bold vision. We must do this with a sense of purpose, a sense of confidence and focus. We must do so with the knowledge that this will not be easy and comfortable; rather it will stretch us as we overcome obstacles. *Walden* also tells us that we do not learn about ourselves and truly see our full opportunities when we live comfortable and sedate. Even in our successes we must strive and ask ourselves what can we do better, how can we improve. Our castles should be ever elevating and expanding.

Since its founding, Murray State has built castles in the air. In 1922, the General Assembly for the Commonwealth passed Senate Bill 14, which authorized two new colleges — one in the east and the other in the west — focused to meet the increasing need for more and better teachers. On September 27, 1922, Rainey T. Wells presented the case for the town of Murray to be the home of one of these new schools, not by promising what could be done, but by showing what had already been done. He presented two cashier’s checks and a ledger of 1,352 individuals who had committed to gifts totaling over $100,000, a deed of land for the college worth another $17,000, a list of 351 homes that would be opened to board future students, and a commitment from Murray High School to host classes until the first building was completed.

Dr. Wells said that the new university in Murray “…will cast its shadow and nourish every other interest in the community and it, in turn, will be richly rewarded and supported by the community in its own efforts and become one of, if not the finest, college in the Commonwealth.” He said this to instill the fact that it is the goal of Murray State to be the preeminent proponent of community development and growth, the harbinger of intellectualism, the catalyst of ideas, and the promoter of opportunities that will inspire all of us to always excel and persevere during hardships, support one another and to be a part of something that is larger than one individual or one community.

Since that time we have grown, we have flourished, we have overcome obstacles and difficulties, and we have thrived in our victories and achievements. Here is just a sampling of what we have achieved:

• On our first day offering classes, September 24, 1923, we enrolled 202 students, primarily from the four immediate counties. Now we have 11,116 students from 43 states, 57 foreign countries and 104 Kentucky counties.
• Starting with 17 teachers, we now have 681 instructional faculty, and over 80 percent of those faculty have terminal degrees;
• As a normal school, we had one college — now through six academic colleges and schools we offer 155 bachelor’s programs, 63 master’s programs and two doctoral degrees, and new programs are being added;
• In the early years, we operated out of three buildings — now we have 91 buildings, multiple farms and extended campus sites.
• We maintain the lowest student to faculty ratio in the Commonwealth.
• Among our peers, we have the highest retention and graduation rates in the Commonwealth.
• We have been named among the best universities in our region for 24 consecutive years.
• We have earned, on a per program basis, more discipline-specific accreditations, and at the highest levels, than any other university in the Commonwealth.
• We are the only public university to have a full comprehensive collegiate residential program that is often duplicated but never replicated.
• We are regularly recognized as providing the best value not only in our region, but in the country.

Because of these accomplishments, it is no wonder that many of our academic programs are regionally, nationally or internationally recognized as among the best in their discipline. And, as a result, it should be no surprise that the Honorable Governor Steve Beshear stated publicly, “Murray State is the gem of all of the universities in Kentucky.”

This list of accomplishments is a testament to you — our faculty, our staff, our students and our communities — and your commitment to hard work and a rigorous and unyielding pursuit of excellence. These efforts are supported by our many advocates and benefactors who have given of their time, their talents and their treasures to assist us to realize our goals. They do so because of their belief in our vision and they trust us to be diligent in our efforts to achieve our goals.

Murray State University has built our castle in the air and we have fortified the foundations under it. The pillars that support our castle, the stars on our shield, are Achievement, Endeavor and Hope. These three stars guide our thoughts and actions. They provide our focus and attention to the matters at hand that will continually propel our university forward. The commitment of these three guiding stars continually makes a difference in the lives of our students, alumni and the communities they serve. Our work and our dedication to our individual professions are based on helping others achieve, providing in others the confidence to endeavor through hardships and defeats, and instilling a sense of hope in what we can, and will, overcome.

We have achieved and we continue to do so each and every day, year in and year out. Through these efforts to excel you have lifted the lives and spirits of many. You have assisted students and their families to achieve their own dreams and you have increased the aspirations of many individuals and, yes, whole communities.

Through your conscientious work and dedication you have proven that Murray State is the beacon of hope. We provide the inspiration for people to endeavor and endow the pathway for achievement.

Are we finished with our castle? Have we achieved all that there is? Henry David Thoreau ended Walden with these two lines:

“There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.”
We are indeed at a new day and the sun is burning bright for us. But, as with any new day, new challenges, new ideas and new competitors confront us and we must respond appropriately and immediately. We are not done, we have much to do.

Today, our university, Murray State, is a leading university and nationally recognized for what we have previously achieved. However, in this new day, from our leadership position, we must rebuild and reimagine our castle in the air and build it higher, stronger and realigned with our new environment. To do so we must strengthen our pillars of achievement, endeavor and hope. And do so by fortifying our foundation by reinforcing the rigor of our academic agenda, ensuring our programs are relevant to our students and communities, and always striving to ensure excellence in all that we do.

It is in the spirit of presidents whose names adorn this medallion — Presidents Carr, Wells, Richmond, Woods, Sparks, Curris, Stroup, Kurth, Alexander (King and Kern) Dunn and Miller that we build on their work and their legacies to advance, to grow and fortify our place properly among the best comprehensive student-centered universities in America. Our aim and focus is properly set in being admired as the premier university in the Commonwealth and our region. This is what we are creating, our glorious castle that will inspire hope in our citizens, will give us the courage to endeavor as we stake out those new ventures, and will guide us in calculating the achievements we have made and establish new marks to conquer.

President Wells, in discussing the importance of higher education and Murray State’s position within the Commonwealth, stated:

“The citizenship of the Commonwealth should confidently rely upon its educational system, and especially its colleges and universities, for the thorough, practical and efficient training of its youth, young men and young women of virtue, ideals and proficiency as leaders of integrity, capability and statesmanship.

“Sometimes we are erroneously led to believe that we are happiest when life is easiest and we are able to accomplish our meager desires with the least effort. Situations of this character are not satisfying to the ambitious. Only accomplishments requiring the most earnest efforts produce sincere and permanent enjoyment.

“It is the opportune time to take stock of our enterprise. If we are to expect a beneficial year, we should definitely plan, count the cost, alert to discard the old and unprofitable policies, as well as retain the useful.”

His words ring as true today as when he founded Murray State. He set the tone of pursuing excellence in all that we do by ensuring we are focused on academic rigor in preparing future leaders and that we are committed to having programs which are relevant to the needs of the greater communities we serve. We have earned the trust and confidence of the citizens of the Commonwealth as we develop the minds and souls of our students and assist in the development of the foundation for their ethical actions and the essence of integrity as they assume educational and leadership roles in their futures.
And, as Dr. Wells stated, we do not do this by “setting meager goals that will require the least amount of effort.” That is not who we are. We must be ambitious and bold. We must set goals and expectations that will stretch all of us and take us out of our comfort zone. We cannot take a pathway that is commonly traveled leading to a well-known destination as this will not lead to new ideas and improvements. We pride ourselves in leading the way, we pride ourselves in being innovative and that is why we are deserving of being the true gem of the Commonwealth.

And, as President Wells stated, we must take stock of our enterprise to examine what we do and, just as importantly, what we don’t do. Through this process we asked ourselves the hard questions of where have we excelled, where have we slipped and not kept up with the pace of change and how can we regain our rightful leadership roles in these areas. Similarly, we cannot fall into the trap of contentment because there are many who are working hard to surpass us, to knock us off the precipice. It is our commitment to always improve, to always strive for perfection, which will continue to set us apart and maintain our national reputation.

Last fall, we launched our university-wide strategic planning effort. Through our planning process — which involved most of you through our Town Hall meetings — and focused committee structure, we are setting an ambitious pathway for our university.

By focusing on our strategic initiatives of advancing a culture of Academic Excellence, promoting a dynamic and diverse university community committed to Student Success, fostering an environment of inquiry by advancing Research and Scholarly Activities and improving the quality of life for our communities through Engagement, we are making a commitment to ensure that Murray State University remains a nationally recognized leader in higher education. We are emphasizing that a rigorous academic environment will provide our students with the necessary properties to be leaders who emanate integrity, to prosper financially as well as culturally and civically, to be able to think critically and logically in order to answer the questions that have confounded us, and to erase invisible, but prevalent, barriers that mar our society.

These four initiatives, and the goals that support them, will ensure a sense of relevancy and currency to our effort and actions. They provide us the framework, as a university, to inspire hope, endeavor and achievement in others in the current economic and polarized cultural environment. They will guide in ways that will make a difference, that will move communities from feelings of hardship and despair to one of social equity, economic prosperity and cultural opportunities. They give us focus to ensure that our students and future graduates will be ready to meet the needs of not only today, but are ready for the challenges of tomorrow.

Our goals are not meager, they are ambitious. They will strengthen us and provide us a foundation and pillars to move our university, our castle, higher, make it stronger, and allow it to expand.

We are committing ourselves to set the standard of excellence in all that we do. As my mother has told me so many times, if it is worth doing it is worth doing it the best. Yes, mom, I did listen to you!
We have tremendous successes to build upon. We have built national programs of distinction and we are building more. Through our planning efforts we are reaffirming and ensuring that a Murray State diploma sets one apart, that we have preeminent faculty and will continue to recruit and retain the best and brightest in their disciplines, that our staff members are leaders in their fields and committed to student success. And we are committing to the success of our students. We are putting our flag in the ground that says to be a Murray State community is an honor as it is an affirmation of one’s past accomplishments but, more importantly, a belief in one’s potential to transform not only themselves, but their community. We do this, one person, one student, one community, at a time.

President Woods, in addressing the faculty at the beginning of the 1970 academic year said, “Murray State University is not the largest university in the United States, but it is well-known and well-recognized. Please catch the spirit. Help strengthen it.”

I know I have caught the spirit of President Woods. I look forward to working with each of you — for many years — as we help strengthen Murray State University — the finest place we will ever know.

God bless you and Go Racers!