



**BALL STATE  
UNIVERSITY**

Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNS  
FALL CONVOCATION  
EMENS AUDITORIUM  
AUGUST 21, 2020  
9:00 A.M.**

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you, Susana. During these challenging times, I am especially grateful for your leadership and for your guidance.

Last Fall, Susana was recognized as a 2019 Woman of Influence by the *Indianapolis Business Journal*. It's a well-deserved honor that reminds us of how fortunate we are to have her as our provost.

To this year's award recipients, congratulations. Your contributions are profound and enduring. I appreciate all that you do to advance the mission of our University.

In her introductory remarks, the provost welcomed our new dean and our new faculty members. I would like to welcome two other new members of our University community.

Last December, Governor Holcomb appointed the newest member of our Board of Trustees. Mark Hardwick is a Ball State graduate and the chief operating officer and chief financial officer of First Merchants Bank, which is headquartered in Muncie. Mark earned his bachelor's degree in economics in 1993, and he was a member of the 1989-1990 men's basketball team that was inducted into our Athletics Hall of Fame.

I also want to welcome Paula Luff as our new vice president for enrollment planning and management. Paula joined us in April from DePaul University.

To all of our faculty and staff—welcome. And thank you for being with us “virtually” from your office or from wherever else you may be joining us this morning.

I wish you were here with me in Emens Auditorium. This small, but special audience will represent you until we can hold this program again in person next year. Like you, I look forward to that day with great anticipation.

This year, I begin my fourth academic year as the president of Ball State University. Today, and every day, it is a privilege to serve you.

At our Convocation last August, I described how impressed I was with the impact of your work. I shared how inspired I am by your many contributions, which are leading us to our bright future.

For nine months—from last July through early March—that momentum continued, and I am going to talk about that progress in a moment.

But then we confronted two extraordinary challenges: the global pandemic, and the civil unrest in our country that has demonstrated an urgent need for us to accelerate our efforts to create a campus, a community, and a country that are more equitable and more just.

It is important for me to discuss these two pressing issues as well.

To begin, though, I want to remind you of just some of the good things that happened last year. I will share a few examples of how our momentum continues to be driven by you, our dedicated faculty and staff—and by our talented students and graduates.

Last Fall, Janet Fick and James Jones, faculty members from our College of Architecture and Planning, led a multidisciplinary group of students in becoming the first collegiate team in the Midwest—and only the fifth in the world—to certify that an existing building met the LEED standards of the U.S. Green Building Council.

Last January, for the 16th consecutive year, students from our Department of Theatre and Dance earned national awards at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. And Professor Jennifer Blackmer received the Kennedy Center Medallion, a prestigious award that is one of the greatest honors in theatre education.

Faculty from our Department of Telecommunications partnered with colleagues from the School of Music's media production program and colleagues from the Department of Speech Pathology and Audiology to work with students to design a project to measure the volume of Netflix programming. They presented their findings virtually to Netflix audio personnel earlier this Summer.

Last year, students from our music media production program continued to introduce local teenagers to the magic of music production.

With support from a Provost's Immersive Learning grant, Professor Christoph Thompson and ten of his students installed a recording studio and control room—complete with professional headsets, music, and computers—inside the Buley Center. The Buley Center is a community center that is a cornerstone of Muncie's Whitely neighborhood. Christoph's students created the Junior Producers Club to help young people learn about song structure and music theory.

Christoph's work with his students is just one example of how our faculty engage in educational opportunities that help our students develop professionally and that have a positive impact on our community.

Last November, colleagues from the College of Health presented our University's first interactive poverty simulation. This event provided our students with a better understanding of how poverty affects people.

Students from the College of Health who were enrolled in a community nutrition course also donated more than 200 hours of their time to local hunger relief agencies. Their community service is just one of the ways we have been addressing food insecurity in our region.

Another example is Professor Adam Berland's work last Spring with his geography students, mapping our local food system. Their research benefitted the Delaware County Food Council. The council was formed in cooperation with the Muncie Food Hub Partnership, which is directed by Professor Josh Gruver. Both Adam and Josh teach in our College of Sciences and Humanities.

Students in our hospitality and food management program also created a free dining program at Allegré, our student-run restaurant. The students provided 900 meals to members of the campus and local communities who are food insecure.

As a community-engaged University, we are committed to serving our friends and neighbors. But we also serve people far beyond our State.

Last September, I met with several faculty members who told me about their recent trip to Kenya. While there, they presented to high schools, hospitals, and health centers to spread awareness about sickle cell anemia. They also visited a village school where they delivered uniforms, medicine, and supplies.

The trip was arranged by Professor Winnie Mucherah from our Teachers College. Since joining our University 20 years ago, Winnie has established partnerships with universities in her native Kenya—partnerships that have allowed our faculty to engage in important international scholarship.

Like our faculty, our students seek opportunities to learn, to grow, and to make a difference in other countries. Earlier today, we honored Barb Stedman with our Outstanding Advisor Award. This past Spring, thanks to Barb's guidance, we celebrated our 12th U.K. Fulbright Summer Institute recipient in nine years. Zander Lichosik, an exercise science major and Honors College student, will spend three weeks next Summer in Scotland, where he will take courses in biomedical science and explore the culture and history of Glasgow. Barb also mentored biology major Siara Sandwith, who became our 12th Goldwater Scholarship recipient in our history.

I am proud of all of our students who received competitive scholarships. I am also proud of our student-athletes. Last Spring, across all sports programs, our

student-athletes earned a collective GPA of 3.32—the highest in our University’s history. Approximately 60 percent of our student-athletes made the dean’s list, and 74 Cardinals earned perfect 4.0 GPAs.

Notwithstanding the challenges of the pandemic, it was a good year for our academic colleges and divisions.

It was also a good year for our fundraising.

For the second year in a row, our alumni and benefactors memorialized more than \$30 million in new philanthropic commitments—the first time that we’ve reached this level in consecutive years.

This past Spring, we also held our second annual One Ball State Day. In the days leading up to April 7, we were anxious about how the pandemic might impact our success. We considered cancelling the event, but we decided to proceed because we knew that our students needed financial support.

Together, our faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends contributed \$530,000. The 24-hour campaign resulted in more than 6,300 gifts from more than 4,300 donors. They demonstrated that, especially during challenging times, Cardinals care.

I am very grateful to all of the women and men who continue to contribute to our University. And I am grateful to our partners in the Foundation who encourage this philanthropy.

Our strong fundraising success has generated the positive momentum we need to launch our next capital campaign, the most ambitious in our University’s history.

“Ambitious” is also the word to describe the long-term 2040 goals we have established in our strategic plan, which we continue to implement.

In December, our Board approved the Strategic Imperative Fund. Our original intent was to award up to \$5 million to support innovative projects that would advance our strategic plan. But because of current budget constraints, I decided to fund a smaller number of proposals for a total of approximately \$2.2 million.

This Summer, we also completed our first Strategic Plan Annual Report. This report illustrates the progress in each of our strategic imperatives. I will share the report with you soon. But some of the highlights include our enhanced enrollment strategies to serve underrepresented students, our launch of several new programs to serve lifetime learners, and the completion of our Inclusive Excellence Plan, which I’ll talk more about in a few minutes.

The third goal of our strategic plan is to mobilize and lead partnerships that revitalize our city and our region. We can make progress toward this goal by increasing our community-engaged coursework, immersive learning projects, and outreach events.

To pursue this objective in a new way, our College of Communication, Information, and Media is coordinating with our Office of Immersive Learning to launch our first Immersive Learning Collaborative. CCIM is making a multi-year commitment to a single community partner, the 8Twelve Coalition. This coalition is working to improve the quality of life in one of Muncie's urban neighborhoods. CCIM students will work with the 8Twelve Coalition to address several issues, including neighborhood revitalization, community building, and food insecurity. The goal of this new immersive learning model is to create meaningful and lasting change that can be accomplished through coordinated projects and programs, as well as research and volunteer efforts.

Another objective of the third goal of our strategic plan is our historic partnership with Muncie Community Schools. In the past two years, we have made significant strides to transform our public schools.

I am grateful to our colleagues from the Office of Community Engagement for their commitment to this partnership, especially Tiffani Arnold Pine. As the community volunteer program manager for MCS, Tiffani works with principals and other MCS teachers and staff to mobilize people and organizations to volunteer to serve our local public schools.

I am also grateful to everyone who played a role in drafting the MCS Academic Innovation Plan, especially faculty from our Teachers College. This plan describes how the district will collaborate with our University and with other community partners to implement an innovative, community-based education model that guides students from cradle to career.

By implementing this plan, MCS continues on a trajectory to create an exceptional educational experience for every child in Muncie.

Last Fall, I spoke about our University's need to improve our undergraduate retention rate. I am pleased to report that our retention rate is presently tracking five percentage points higher than last year.

I am grateful to Susana and Ro-Anne Royer Engle, and their respective teams, for developing our comprehensive retention plan. This plan is still evolving, but I am encouraged by the progress we are making.

I am also pleased by how our colleges and divisions are dedicating their own resources to address this important issue.

Last Fall, our Miller College of Business created a new signature program called "SOAR." This program provides undergraduate students with meaningful opportunities to enhance career competencies, to develop professional preparedness, and to connect with campus resources. The college also hired a new director of student success who will oversee "SOAR" and lead the college's other retention initiatives.

REACH is another program that helps our students succeed. REACH is a one-credit-hour course that prepares incoming students for the transition to college, with a focus on students of color and first-generation students. The course is taught by Bobby Steele, the director of our Multicultural Center. Bobby reports that 90 percent of first-year students who participated in REACH last year are returning this Fall.

As important as it is for us to have a comprehensive retention plan in place—a plan supported by innovative programs like SOAR and REACH—it’s our people who have the greatest impact on whether our students continue their college education.

I am grateful to Gloria Pavlik and her staff for their contributions. Last March, Gloria and her team made retention awards to several students whose bursar balances would have impeded their ability to register for the Fall.

The parent of one of those students sent Gloria a hand-written thank you note, which described what a challenging few months it had been for their family and how the award to his daughter had been, in his words, “a godsend.”

The student’s father wrote, “Ball State is a fantastic university, and this [award] is a perfect example of what makes this such a great institution. Some of the kindest and best people work there, and you are certainly among those who represent your institution with exceptionalism.”

Notes of gratitude like this one reveal how committed our faculty and staff are to the success of our students.

And our students deserve this commitment, because they are as exceptional as our employees. As I’ve said many times: our students don’t have a sense of entitlement; they have a sense of purpose.

Approximately 34 percent of our undergraduate students are Pell Grant recipients, 14 percent are 21st Century Scholars, and our minority and first-generation student enrollments are at an all-time high.

The aspirations of our students are reflected in these statistics. But I am inspired by stories about our graduates’ passionate pursuit of fulfilling careers and meaningful lives.

This year, our state’s 21st Century scholars program celebrated its 30-year anniversary. Our University has graduated more than 4,600 21st Century Scholars through the history of the program.

One of those graduates is Mike Rivera.

Mike earned his bachelor’s degree in child development in 2013. Two years later, he returned to our University—this time online—to earn his master’s degree.

Today, Mike works in Northern Indiana as a home visitor with Head Start. He meets with low-income families to make sure their young children reach

developmental milestones. As the first in his family to graduate from college, Mike is among many 21st Century Scholars who have chosen a career of selfless service. His reason is simple. Mike said, “A lot of us have been given an opportunity to advance ourselves and we want to give back. We want to help those who don’t have a voice.”

Matthew Peiffer is a Ball State student who wants to give back.

Today, Matt is studying to earn his undergraduate degree in social work. But growing up as a child in foster care, Matt suffered years of abuse and neglect. After his adoptive parents were prosecuted for their crimes, Matt spent two years living in eight foster homes.

Matt wants no other foster child to go through what he did. That’s why he created “A Voice for Kids,” a non-profit organization dedicated to helping people recognize the warning signs of abuse of children in foster care.

Last January, Matt received national attention for his advocacy work when he participated in T-Mobile’s “Changemaker Challenge.” As one of the contest winners, Matt received \$2,000 and traveled to T-Mobile’s headquarters, where he met with mentors from the wireless company.

Matt’s capacity to overcome the hardships in his life—to turn his negative experiences into positive ones—is inspiring. His story reminds us that good can come from a challenging situation.

And never in our history has a situation been more challenging than this current pandemic. I know that, both professionally and personally, this pandemic has caused you to endure many disappointments and losses. And I know that the ongoing uncertainty begets anxiety.

Despite these disappointments and that anxiety, I have been impressed—and gratified—to witness the many ways in which the members of our University community have adjusted to a new version of academic life, one that’s been reshaped by COVID-19.

Permit me to share some examples that illustrate the agility and tenacity of our faculty, staff, and students.

Last Spring, Professor Maura Jasper and the students in her immersive art class helped the Muncie Arts and Culture Council plan a micro cinema festival. The students wanted to hold the festival in person, but they were pre-empted by pandemic restrictions.

Maura’s students saw this disruption as an opportunity to harness their creativity. They made a “Micro Cinema in a Box.” It contained everything they had created for the event—from marketing and social media plans to graphics for print—and they presented the package to the Council. The Council is using these materials to promote the rescheduled festival that will take place in downtown Muncie.

You may have read the story about a group of students and recent graduates from our School of Music who created “Bassoons Filling Bellies.” Harriet Legan, who graduated in May, founded the group, which has been hosting weekly bassoon ensemble concerts on YouTube. Earlier this month, Harriet told me the performers were close to their goal of raising \$2,000 for Feeding America. The money they’ve collected so far has funded more than 18,000 meals for people facing hunger during the pandemic.

Harriet is a reminder of the spirit of Beneficence, which is a hallmark of our University community.

Beneficence also reminds us that we are grounded in certain enduring values, one of which is gratitude.

In the spirit of Beneficence—of gratitude—I want to thank our faculty and staff—each and every one of you—who redesigned courses for hybrid and online instruction.

In May, we converted all of our on-campus Summer classes—approximately 400 sections—to online courses. And this Fall, we have migrated approximately 900 traditionally on-campus courses to online instruction.

This was a Herculean task. I am grateful to our colleagues from the Division of Online and Strategic Learning and from the Office of Information Technology for helping our faculty accomplish this remarkable feat.

I also want to thank everyone in our Office of Undergraduate Admissions for quickly shifting our campus tours and Summer orientation to a virtual format. Last Spring, our admissions staff purchased a social media app to help our incoming students connect with each other during orientation. Within a month of ZeeMee’s launch, the prospective students who downloaded the app had logged 70,000 views of the video profiles created by our orientation leaders. In that same time, the students exchanged more than 45,000—45,000!—messages with each other.

I am grateful to Paula and Chris Munchel and their colleagues for helping us engage with our incoming students during the pandemic. Our colleagues in the Bursar’s and Financial Aid offices also deserve special recognition for their role in distributing more than \$7 million in CARES Act funding to our eligible students.

Throughout last Spring and Summer, we faced an urgent need to provide timely updates about our University’s response to the pandemic. I want to thank the staff in Marketing and Communications for helping us distribute these messages. Since March, I have received several emails from parents expressing their gratitude for our clear and consistent communications. One father, Ellis Reyes, described our emails as “a positive lifeline to the Fall semester.”

Ellis told me that, because of COVID-19, his daughter, Maria, spent the final months of her high school career in Mercer Island, Washington, in a funk. Until one drizzly afternoon, when Maria, who was filling her car up with gas, received a call. It was Bill Jenkins from our Department of Theatre and Dance, calling to let Maria know that she had secured one of only 22 available openings in our BFA in acting program.

In his own words, Ellis said: “Maria’s tears were immediate and overwhelming. So much so that a kind woman getting gas at an adjacent pump came over to ask if she was okay. My daughter’s reply was, ‘This is the best day of my life!’”

Ellis shared this story with me in response to the email I sent about our plans for the Fall. Ellis told me he appreciated our courageous choice to resume some on-campus instruction. He wrote, “We’ll be there in a couple of months to drop off my daughter, proudly embracing our new role as BSU parents.”

We are able to welcome Maria to campus because of the hundreds of employees who have dedicated themselves to our safe return.

I am especially grateful to the members of our TRUST committee who helped to coordinate our response to the pandemic. The committee identified a wide range of issues, and the committee made recommendations for how to prioritize safety in our classrooms, our offices, our residence and dining halls, and our recreation facilities.

I also want to thank Student Affairs and Housing and Residence Life for safely helping our students move out of the residence halls last Spring—and then spending so much time this Summer developing protocols to allow them to move back this past week.

We also benefited from the dedication and hard work of our colleagues in Facilities. Jim Lowe and his team have done a great job adjusting our classrooms to reduce density, installing physical distancing signs and Plexiglass barriers across campus, and acquiring necessary cleaning and sanitizing supplies.

I am also grateful to those employees whose responsibilities required them to work on campus throughout the pandemic. From our maintenance crews and landscapers to our custodians and cashiers, these women and men kept our University running—and their work did not go unnoticed.

A few weeks ago, I received an email from a local resident who graduated from Ball State in 1969. This gentleman told me that he has Stage 4 prostate cancer. To keep his muscles strong, he and his wife drive in from Eaton several times a week to walk around campus. He wrote, “This year, the BSU grounds are more beautiful than ever.”

He asked, in his own words, “please thank your fantastic groundskeeping crew.” He told me that their work has extended his life.

This morning, I have an opportunity to honor his request. I also want to extend my own gratitude to the dedicated women and men who, every day, no matter the weather, keep our campus clean and beautiful.

And I want to recognize one of our bus drivers, Brian Kemp. Brian's name came up during one of the campus conversations I had with faculty and staff last Winter, and in several emails that I received last Spring.

One of those emails came from a student named Lynsey Leeson. Lynsey wrote, "I wanted to let you know that I truly appreciate the bus drivers at Ball State. There is one driver who has gone above and beyond to help students and make sure they are safe. His name is Brian, and he drives one of the orange loops. He is the best bus driver I have ever had the honor to meet."

Brian's dedication exemplifies our enduring value of excellence.

Now, I must speak about how grateful I am—how grateful we all should be—that our University was able to sustain our operations last Spring without taking the kind of disruptive cost-cutting measures that other institutions were forced to take.

Last March, layoffs and furloughs beset many colleges and universities. In contrast, our trustees authorized our Extraordinary Temporary Paid Leave Plan. Under this plan, any employee who was unable to work because of COVID-19 received their regular pay through the remainder of the fiscal year, which ended on June 30.

The financial benefit to our employees who took advantage of this plan was \$3.1 million dollars. All of us should feel fortunate that we work for an institution that has managed our financial resources prudently for many years. Our history of fiscal responsibility is what allowed us to support our employees in this remarkable way.

Of course, we are not immune to the economic fallout of this pandemic. Because of a \$10 million reduction in our state appropriation this year, as well as uncertain enrollment, we had to implement cost-cutting measures this Summer to reduce our operating expenses. I appreciate the people who had to make these difficult decisions, and I know that many of you have worked hard to support your colleagues and our students.

Because we cannot predict the end of this public health crisis, we may have to find additional efficiencies in the future.

But we face this uncertainty from a position of strength. And this strength empowers us to confront these challenges with confidence. This strength gives us the capacity—and the courage—to weather this historic storm.

We face another challenge—as a campus, as a community, and as a country—the ongoing challenge of creating a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive environment for all people.

This challenge was brought into sharp focus last January, when an unfortunate incident took place in one of our classrooms. This incident happened on the same day—the very same day—that we announced our new inclusive excellence plan, the first in our University’s history.

This plan was the result of a consultative process that flowed directly from our strategic plan. Our inclusive excellence plan represents the next step in our journey.

Of course, we have a long way to go before we reach our ambitious goal of inclusive excellence, but we shouldn’t overlook all of the work that has been completed by dedicated members of our campus community. This work serves as the foundation for our efforts to serve a student body that continues to grow increasingly diverse.

Over the past 10 years, the number of underrepresented minority students has increased from approximately 2,100 to more than 3,800 students.

Our on-time, four-year graduation rate for these students has increased from 24 percent to 42 percent.

And at the heart of our campus, we are building our new \$4 million Multicultural Center, a facility that will allow us to expand programming to serve all of our students.

I am proud of our progress. But our inclusive excellence plan recognizes that we have much more work to do before we have a campus culture where every person feels welcome, respected, and valued.

That’s why, after hearing additional input from many people, I announced several actions that will enhance our inclusive excellence work. I shared these steps in a report that detailed our University’s response to the requests I received from the faculty, staff, and students.

I encourage you to review our inclusive excellence plan and the progress report that I distributed in June. Both of these documents were made stronger by the wisdom of Marsha McGriff, our associate vice president for inclusive excellence.

I am grateful to Marsha and her team for helping us to advance the goals of our inclusive excellence plan.

One of these goals is our University’s commitment to provide inclusive excellence training to members of our campus and local communities. In the past few weeks, Marsha and her team have conducted training sessions with some of our staff, with the YMCA, with MCS employees, and with city and county law enforcement officers.

Marsha is also the champion of Inclusive Excellence Taking Flight, one of the new initiatives supported by our Strategic Imperative Fund. With this initiative, Marsha will create Inclusive Excellence Champions, a certificate

program that will help people develop the skills they need to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in their lives and in their workplaces. In her research, Marsha discovered that no other college or university in Indiana is offering a program like ours.

A good plan and specific metrics are tangible elements of a successful strategy to achieve inclusive excellence. But I believe some intangible attributes are also vital to success.

In our Beneficence Pledge, we ask every member of the Ball State community to value the intrinsic worth of every person on our campus. To live this pledge, I believe that we must listen empathetically to the perspectives and experiences of other people. We must listen with an open mind. We must listen with humility. We must listen with an open heart. We must listen with compassion and with grace.

I believe that our students lead us in this work. I saw this truth when, in June, our students organized a peaceful march in Muncie.

I recently heard another story that validates my belief that our students inspire us to care for and respect others, including people who are different from us.

In June, Clark Kitchen heard about a “Black Lives Matter” demonstration happening in Fort Wayne. Clark asked his mother to drive him from Huntington to hand out food to the people who were peacefully protesting.

A reporter asked Clark what had prompted him want to feed the demonstrators gathered in front of the city’s courthouse. Clark said he was inspired to help people make a positive change because of social media—and because of our Beneficence Pledge.

Clark and so many of our students embody our commitment to inclusiveness. I suggest that we follow their lead.

I believe the late Congressman John Lewis, a civil rights hero, also embodied our enduring values.

I never met Congressman Lewis, but I did have an opportunity to hear him speak. And I will never forget the experience.

It was a frigid April morning in 2018—50 years to the day that Dr. Martin Luther King was shot and killed in Memphis. Congressman Lewis and I were both in Indianapolis for a dedication ceremony commemorating the famous speech Bobby Kennedy gave there after learning Dr. King had been assassinated. Congressman Lewis was there because he had been in Indianapolis with Kennedy on the night that Dr. King was assassinated. I was at the dedication ceremony because of Ball State’s connection to the speech—a speech that Kennedy had delivered just hours after he made a campaign stop at our University.

I sat in the front row at the ceremony, listening to Congressman Lewis speak. The power and passion of his words warmed our hearts. He gave me hope to believe in a world that will be more peaceful and more just.

As you know, Congressman Lewis died a month ago this week. Two days before he passed, he submitted an essay to the *New York Times*, an essay he asked the newspaper to publish on the day of his funeral.

Congressman Lewis wrote: “In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way of peace, the way of love and nonviolence, is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring. . . . So, I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”

As we continue on our quest for equal justice, let his words be our guide.

In the days following Congressman Lewis’s death, I read firsthand accounts from people whose lives he touched. Some people knew Congressman Lewis for years. For others, their connection to him was forged in the few seconds that it took for him to offer a handshake or a hug.

These stories reminded me that each one of us has the capacity to make a positive impression on people, much in the way Congressman Lewis had a positive impact on so many people.

I think about a faculty member who always makes a student feel like their question is her opportunity to help that student succeed.

The advisor who, even when she’s out of the office, responds promptly to a student’s email.

The bus driver who waits to make sure his passenger gets to her car safely.

I have the privilege of hearing these stories—stories that demonstrate how your everyday acts of kindness and generosity have a transformative impact on our students.

Last November, I received an email from the parent of one of our graduates, Gunner Bills.

Gunner graduated from our University with honors in May 2019. But when his parents brought Gunner to campus his freshman year, they weren’t sure that he would complete his first semester.

The same day that Gunner moved into his room in DeHority Hall, the Bills were back before midnight to pick him up. Gunner’s mom, Vanessa, wrote, “I knew then this was the beginning of a long year.”

Gunner was highly intelligent, but he had poor social skills. And he was homesick. His parents were determined to keep their son enrolled at Ball State, even though it meant they had to drive down from Fort Wayne every Friday to pick him up and then bring him back to campus just a few days later.

Each week, Vanessa would ask Gunner what he liked about Ball State, and Gunner would talk about his computer science classes. And that was it.

Then one day, Gunner told Vanessa about a custodian that he had met.

Gunner texted his mother, “There is this custodian here who is really nice, and he is trying to learn our names. I like him.”

Every other day, Gunner would tell his mother about how this custodian would say things to him like, “Hi Gunner! Hope you are having a good day!” or “Hey Gunner, you doing anything on Fall break? I’m going fishing.”

In her own words, Vanessa wrote: “I believe this custodian saved my son from leaving Ball State. Gunner had someone who knew his name outside of class. And I knew things were turning around when Gunner decided to dress up for Halloween and to pass out candy at DeHority.”

Vanessa continued, “At the end of his first semester, he decided to stay. I’m not sure the ending would have been the same had it not been for that custodian. ... To this day, I’m not sure of his name, but I believe it was Steve.”

According to Vanessa, when Gunner returned to campus his sophomore year, this custodian was the first person to say, “Hi Gunner! I’m glad your back!”

Vanessa shared with me that she had wanted to write this letter several times, but she had always gotten distracted. In her final line, Vanessa wrote, “Four years later, Gunner graduated, and he has since started a good career, and that is in part due to that kind custodian at DeHority.”

Ladies and gentlemen, that kind custodian is here with us today in Emens Auditorium. Steve Smith, thank you for joining us.

I asked Steve to be my special guest so that I could recognize him for the remarkable impact he had on Gunner’s life—and I believe on so many other students.

Steve knew that I was going to acknowledge him this morning. What he didn’t know was how I planned to conclude my remarks: by presenting him with one of our University’s highest honors, the President’s Medal of Distinction.

Susana, will you please assist me?

Steve, in conferring upon you the President’s Medal of Distinction, we recognize your character and your kindness in your service to our students. It is my distinct honor to bestow upon you this President’s Medal of Distinction.

Steve, I suspect that you will remember this day. It is a memorable moment for me, too. Today is only the second time that I have bestowed this medal upon a deserving recipient. You remind us that, every day, we have an opportunity to positively impact—to transform the lives of other people.

At the outset of my remarks, I implied that this past year was, in reality, two very different years.

But the more I reflected on this past year, I realized that, while there were some stark differences, there was, in fact, a common theme—a subtle, but powerful thread that was inextricably woven throughout this year.

That common thread is the commitment of the women and men of our University.

Today, even in the midst of the ongoing challenges we face, I stand before you more proud, more grateful, and more confident than ever before.

Because of all of you, I know that our best days are yet to come.

I believe that we will overcome this temporary challenge because we can rely on each other. We can depend on each other. We can lean on each other.

This year, our support for one another is going to look a bit different.

It will be different, because we must maintain physical distance. And we must wear masks that hide our smiles and our expressions of empathy.

We can't shake hands right now—or give hugs. We can't rely on many of the traditional ways in which we forge a physical connection that demonstrates our interdependency as human beings.

And yet, because of this pandemic, we have come to realize that we are increasingly dependent on each other for our safety, for our health, and for our personal wellbeing.

So, as we steel ourselves for the uncertainties that lie ahead, let us soften our hearts.

Let us be there for each other as colleagues and as friends.

In what has become my signature send-off, I have once again asked Bill Jenkins to help me close out our program.

Because of the pandemic, Bill had to get creative with this year's performance. So he asked Professor Christoph Thompson and Talon Cooper, a telecommunications student, to help him create a music video. Bill also assembled a talented group of theatre students and graduates, including Kayla Davion, who is currently on hiatus from her role in the Tina Turner musical on Broadway.

This group will perform a compilation of two songs arranged by Professor Michael Rafter.

Ladies and gentlemen, please enjoy this moving video.