



Patrick F. Leahy

Founders Gala | June 4, 2016

Wow, what a great night for Theresa & Clayton, for all of those who know and love them, for Wilkes University, and for the entire Wilkes-Barre community!

We started the Founder's Gala two years ago as an annual tradition with three primary purposes: 1) to remember and honor, 2) to raise and support, and 3) to gather and unite. Let me explain.

The first goal of this gathering is to remember and honor people who have advanced this institution from Bucknell University Junior College to Wilkes College to Wilkes University. Any remembrance needs to begin with the closest person we have to a founder, Eugene Farley. I am delighted to have 2 members of the Farley family here tonight. Would the members of the Farley family please rise so that we might recognize you?

In his memoirs, President Farley wrote: "I believe we should always recognize that it is the individual who gives substance and vitality to an institution." It is the individual who gives substance and vitality to an institution. I often articulate this same sentiment another way, perhaps not so artfully. I say simply: "Great people make great universities."

So, our first goal tonight is to remember and honor individuals throughout our history who have given substance and vitality to our university. Certainly, we must remember Dr. Farley. For 36 years he – with the support of his wife Eleanor – guided the development of this institution through its early, challenging phases.

But, there were others – plenty of others – too: Arnaud Marts, Andrew Sordoni, Gilbert McClintock, Harold Stark, Dorothy Dart, George Ralston, and so many others. All of these individuals would be President's Medal recipients themselves, if only we had started this tradition earlier in our history. I hope their actions of yesterday will continue to inspire our actions of today and of tomorrow.

And, we also use tonight's gathering to honor additional people – people who are working to make Wilkes great. With the President's Medal, Wilkes' highest honor, we recognize individuals who advance Wilkes toward its full potential, people like Theresa & Clayton Karambelas.

The second goal of this gathering is to raise money and support students, in particular those courageous students who are the first in their families to go to college – students like Youstena Zaki. Thank you, Youstena, for sharing your thoughts with us tonight and for representing your University so well.

And, thanks to all of you I'm proud that this year's dinner, as Tom suggested, has raised \$360 thousand dollars for the First Generation Fund. \$360 thousand dollars. That's a big number for this area!

But, why is this so significant for a university with a \$125 million annual operating budget, which dedicates over \$20 million in institutional aid each year? Because after all of our efforts to keep the cost of a Wilkes education affordable, after all of the institutional aid that we can offer, after all of the federal and state aid programs that we can tap, sometimes gaps remain that prevent first-generation students from affording a Wilkes education. The First Generation Fund bridges these gaps. In addition to Youstena, there are countless examples of your money making a difference in students' lives. Consider Sky and Angel Reese, who are twin first generation students from GAR here in Wilkes-Barre. They are strong students, but their family income was just \$20,000. Without the aid of the First Generation Fund, a private education at Wilkes is just not possible for them.

Or, take Adson Hooper from Hanover Area, who will come to Wilkes in large part because of her positive experience as a Young Scholar. She had to work at a local deli in order to afford the Young Scholar tuition, which is just \$80 per credit. There's no way Wilkes is possible for her without the First Generation Fund.

Or, consider Aaron, who was planning on attending Temple, that is, until all of you closed a gap through the First Generation Fund. His family members never dreamed of sending their son to a private college or university.

Or, take Meghan, who was the valedictorian of her high school class of 700. She was all set to go to Penn State, when she visited campus and met Dr. Mike Steele. (I don't know exactly what you said to her, Mike, but she's coming to Wilkes.) She credits her visit to campus and her First Generation scholarship as reasons.

Or, take Nicolette, who's being raised by a single mom who works as a waitress. Her dad left her family when she was young, never raising or supporting Nicolette. Nicolette herself has been working part-time for years now.

This is a sacred mission that we have here at Wilkes: to find individuals with promise – who need that extra mentoring – and offer it to them, no matter their socio-economic situation. My Grandfather Leahy, who was never able to obtain a college education, used to say: "If you get an education, you get a chance." That's a big part of what we are celebrating tonight: giving deserving students a chance.

Let me give you a few numbers to consider: \$74k, 41%, and 50%. The average annual income of our freshman families is \$74,000, well below other private schools across the nation. The number of first-year students who are Pell eligible, that is, the federal aid program for the neediest students, is 41%, well above other private schools across the nation. And, 50% of our first-year students – even today in 2016 – are the first in their families to pursue a 4-year college degree, again well above other private schools across the country. One of our recent, first-generation graduates said: "This is a huge first step for my family. I am doing this for them." We say to these students what Eugene Farley and George Ralston and so many others through the years said to their students: YOU ARE WELCOME HERE! You see, we at Wilkes believe that talent is everywhere, and it is our duty as educators to find it in our students and help them unleash it.

And, that is why The Economist recognized Wilkes as one of the best. The Economist, one of the world's most respected publications, has been continuously published since 1843. This past Fall for the very first time it ranked U.S. colleges and universities on the economic value which they add to their graduates. The publication ranked 1,275 schools from 1 to 1275. Your Wilkes University was ranked 25th in the nation, just one place ahead of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and 3 places ahead of Duke University on this single measure.

But, this work – this extremely important work – is just not possible without resources. And, that's why we host the Founders Gala each year. On behalf of all of these students and so many others, THANK YOU. And, on behalf of all of us who feel privileged to serve these students, THANK YOU for giving us this opportunity. Your support is making a difference, and it will forever change the trajectory of future generations in each of these families to come.

And the third goal of this event is to gather all of you together and unite you in a common cause. All of you – for whatever reason – care about Wilkes.

Maybe you are an alumnus or alumna, and you feel that Wilkes played an important role in your development as a person.

Maybe you sent your son or daughter to Wilkes, and you feel grateful for the ways in which Wilkes cared for him or her.

Maybe you are a faculty or staff member, and you believe so deeply in our work that you have dedicated your life to it.

Maybe you are a member of the Wilkes-Barre community, and you appreciate what Wilkes means to your community.

Maybe your company does business with Wilkes, and you appreciate the work.

Maybe you just think Wilkes knows how to throw a great party!

Whatever the reason, you are here tonight, and hopefully you believe that Wilkes University really can become one of the finest small universities, not just around here, but anywhere. Is this just an ambitious university president's crazy dream? Well, yes, it is! But, it is supported with a very clear strategy to change our Carnegie classification from a regional masters university to a national doctoral one. And, when we do, we will join a list with the greatest universities in the country, and we'll be one of the smallest on that list, combining all of the programs, activities, and opportunities of a large research university with the caring, mentoring culture of a small liberal arts college.

And, in so doing, we will become an even greater force for positive economic, social, and cultural development for the Wyoming Valley, for greater NEPA, for the Commonwealth of PA, for our great country, and increasingly for the world. Ultimately, like me, I hope all of you believe that this University matters, and that the best days of it – and the best days of this Wilkes-Barre community – still lie ahead of us.

One event: three goals. I think we've met those goals here tonight.

Let me conclude with a final thought. In his memoir, President Farley talked at length about the support that he received from so many of these early founders that “enabled us to translate a dream for the College and for the community into a reality.” Then, he offered a wish, a prayer of sorts, when he said: “May those who assume responsibility for the further development of the College be sustained in their efforts by similar dedication and loyalty.” May those who assume responsibility for the further development of Wilkes be sustained in their efforts by similar dedication and loyalty. I look out over this gathering at all of you and I feel heartened that the same dedication and loyalty is present today and that President Farley’s wish is coming true during my time here at Wilkes.

No matter who you are, no matter why you are here, no matter what motivates your participation, THANK YOU for being such an integral part of Wilkes University.