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In Celebration of the Arts | June 23, 2017

Remarks delivered at the annual banquet to celebrate the Wilkes University Graduate Program in Creative Writing.

Thank you, Bonnie, for that introduction. More importantly, thank you for your years of dedication to Wilkes in so many ways. Join me in thanking Bonnie for her service to Wilkes. At this juncture in the program's history, I'd also like to take a moment to recognize Bonnie's co-founder, Mike Lennon. Thank you, Mike, for everything you have done to develop this program.

I always say that — of all the events in a given year at Wilkes — this is one of my very favorites because I love the spirit that fills this room. I'd like to begin by thanking each of you for bringing that spirit here to Wilkes. This year it is a particular pleasure for me to address you. With the announcement of the significant gift from the Maslow family, we initiate the next phase in the dynamic history of this program, which is now officially called the Maslow Family Graduate Program in Creative Writing. This support would simply not be possible without the advocacy of our friend Melanie Maslow-Kern. Please join me in thanking Melanie for her unyielding support of Wilkes.

I thought this might be a good time, as we initiate the next phase in this program's development, to talk about the arts. In fact, I think it is a good time to celebrate the arts. First, I'd like to tell you a story from my own experience. Then, I'd like to remind us all why the arts are so important at colleges and universities today. Finally, I'd like to offer some insights into Wilkes' enduring commitment to the arts.

First, a story. One day, way back in late 1985, I was a high school senior. One of my teachers, Greg Moffatt, approached me and asked if I had ever considered applying to Georgetown.

“Georgetown? No way. I can't get in there.”

He persisted. “They look at more than just SAT scores you know.”

“Thank God for that,” I said.

As a Georgetown alumnus himself, Greg offered to take me to D.C. to have a look around. At one point on our campus tour, he walked me into the oldest and largest building on the campus. He wanted to pay a visit to an old friend, Pat Brodie, who was the president's long-time secretary. As we were chatting with Miss Brodie, she asked Greg if we wanted to visit with Fr. Healy, the president, who happened to be in his office that day.

“No, we don’t want to disturb him,” Greg said.

At that moment, a door flew wide open, and a huge man — I mean literally a big man — came rumbling through the door, yelling:

“Paaatttt, where the hell is my briefcase?”

Then, he saw us.

“Greg Moffatt, how are you, my old friend? Please come in.”

And, there I was — within minutes — visiting with the President of Georgetown University, Fr. Tim Healy. Fr. Healy visited with us for 30 minutes, intermittently asking me questions along the way. Toward the end of our visit he asked me:

“Patrick, are you interested in attending Georgetown?”

“Yes sir, Father. It would be a dream come true.”

Then, Fr. Healy turned to Greg:

“Greg, is Patrick Georgetown material?”

“Yes, Father, he is.”

“Then, it’s all set. If you decide to apply to Georgetown this cycle, just let my assistant, Carl, know. In fact, make sure you introduce yourself on your way out.”

When we left the office, I asked:

“Greg, what exactly just happened in there?”

“I think you just got into Georgetown,” Greg replied.

Later that year, I applied to Georgetown as a business major. I notified Carl, as instructed. And — what do you know — I was accepted. This is how I ended up at Georgetown. This is not false modesty. It is the truth. In fact, I can’t say that I’m particularly proud that it played out this way. But that’s not the end of this story.

The following summer I received a call from Greg.

“Pat, do you want to take your freshman English course with the President? He’s teaching freshmen this year.”

“Cool. Sure. How do I do that?”

“When the course catalogue arrives, look up a freshman English course taught by a Professor Bickerstaff and register for it.”

“Bickerstaff? I thought his name was Healy.”

“Yes, it is, but he lists his course each year under a different name. Bickerstaff is the name of a teacher in a Dickens novel.”

So, I did. I was one of 15 students who took the course with Fr. Tim Healy because I received a tip from a mutual friend. Most of my classmates took the course because it fit into their schedules, not appreciating who Bickerstaff really was.

Tim Healy was a big, gruff Irishman with a hot temper. One day, I received an assignment back from him with no grade on it. It simply said, “A clear miss. See me.” He was the most learned man I’ve ever met. No one had command of the English language like Fr. Healy: novels, plays, films, the latest TV shows, New Yorker cartoons. If a line were pertinent to a situation, he could pull it from a vast reservoir of knowledge called his intellect. But his favorite medium, without a doubt, was poetry. This big, gruff Irishman could be moved to tears reciting poetry. He loved to recite the Irish poets.

William Butler Yeats:

“But, I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”

And Seamus Heaney:

“Next morning I went up into the room.
Snowdrops and candles soothed the bedside;
I saw him for the first time in six weeks. Paler now,
wearing a poppy bruise on his left temple,
He lay in the four-foot box as in his cot.
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear.
A four-foot box, a foot for every year.”

And there were others. So many others.

At the end of that semester, I called my father and mother and announced that I was transferring from the School of Business to the College of Arts & Sciences and that I would be majoring in English. You can imagine the reaction from my conservative, corporate executive father.

That one class, with that one professor, opened my eyes to a world I had never really known: the arts. That fall semester, without really knowing it, I became an advocate for the arts.

Why is it so important to study the arts in college? We educators lament the decrease in arts majors — visual, performing, and literary arts majors — in our colleges and universities. Perhaps we in American higher education do not do an effective enough job touting the benefits of an arts degree. I know that our society doesn’t help us. Perhaps the decline is inevitable.

After all, we can't force students to major in the arts. But we can force students today to travel through an arts-intensive general education curriculum in the hopes that students fall in love with the arts, like that kid 30 years ago who took a poetry class with his university president. I like to summarize the importance of the arts this way: engineers ought to read Shakespeare. Why — in a world of science and technology, a STEM world — would you force engineers to read Shakespeare? Or, to put it more broadly, why would you require your professional students to pursue a liberal arts core curriculum?

First, the study of art is very practical. We want our professional students to learn important skills that come from the study of the arts: critical thinking, creativity, communication, empathy. We need our students today to become critical thinkers, capable of questioning assumptions from various viewpoints. If you've ever unpacked a Shakespeare sonnet, then you know how it can develop thinking skills. We want our students to become expert synthesizers of seemingly conflicting information, especially since the great breakthroughs of the future will come at the intersection of disciplines. A recent report from the World Economic Forum lamented the decrease in innovation, blamed in part by the prevailing educational sentiment to specialize.

Evidently, specialization is killing innovation. Innovation comes from the generalist — the student who has studied arts, as well as the sciences — not the specialist — who has only studied engineering. Where we do need students to develop expertise is in communicating. Even in a high-tech, social media world, communicating one's ideas and understanding others' positions is very important, and it's a skill learned in the arts. Finally, we want our engineers not just to be good technical engineers; we want them to collaborate with other engineers and other professionals outside of engineering. We want them to lead others throughout their careers. Students can develop the empathy needed for these pursuits through exposure to the arts. So, arts education can develop practical skills.

But even if the arts don't help students develop practical skills, they force students to confront major life issues. I once met a Russian man who owned — get this — a Mexican restaurant in Moscow. He told me that he operated a restaurant simply to support his real passion: the theater. He said, "It is very important to support the arts because all art forces us to think of one of three things: life, love, or death." The arts force students to confront these issues. The arts help students develop their worldviews and ultimately improve their quality of life. That's what being educated is all about. Norman Mailer — no stranger to this program — said, "The final purpose of art is to intensify, even, if necessary, to exacerbate the moral consciousness of people."

If that's true, then we need to expose all students, regardless of what they study, to the arts, hopefully exacerbating their moral consciousness. George Bernard Shaw said it another way: "You use a glass mirror to see your face; you use works of art to see your soul." We are failing our students at American colleges and universities if they complete a college degree without taking a look — a deep, hard look — at their souls. The arts ensure this.

Students today need to study the arts, both in an effort to hone practical skills and in an effort to develop moral consciousness.

So, what are we doing at Wilkes to support the arts? Lots. I am very proud of our institutional commitment to the arts at a time when the arts are being cut at many educational institutions, including higher education institutions, across the country. It's particularly important here at Wilkes where 51 percent of our 2,400 undergraduates consider themselves the first in their families to pursue a college education. Fifty-one percent. That is unheard of for a private school. I like to say that we out-access even the public schools in providing academic opportunity for students who show promise. Let's face it: these first-generation, low-income students are probably not getting proper exposure to the arts in their homes or even in their schools. We feel a particular obligation as educators to expose them to the arts, even as many of them find their way to Wilkes to study pharmacy, nursing, engineering, business, or the sciences.

This year, the most tangible commitment to the arts at Wilkes will be the opening of the new Sordoni Art Gallery on South Main Street. Two years in the making, our new visual arts strategy includes: the hiring of a new academic director, the expansion and improvement of the gallery space itself, and the implementation of a new strategy to bring high-end, traveling shows to Wilkes-Barre. (Our first show following the re-dedication will be an Andy Warhol exhibit. No one can recall if Wilkes-Barre ever featured an Andy Warhol exhibit.)

At Wilkes, we continue our decades-long commitment to the performing arts: music, dance, and theater. A couple years ago, we created the region's only marching band not as a way to enhance our athletics programs, but as a way to expand our music programs. Research suggests that first-generation, low-income students who participate in the performing arts retain and achieve at higher levels in college.

And, of course, we remain deeply committed to the literary arts here at Wilkes. Our undergraduate literary publication is 70 years old this year. And we have tried to support the graduate creative writing program first with a newly renovated home — Harold Cox Hall — and now with an endowment to provide incremental annual support for Bonnie to continue to develop the program.

This is our commitment. As we develop from a junior college 84 years ago into a research university, we will continue to invest in the arts (and in our housing, I promise, in our housing, too) in the years to come. Why? Because you cannot be a true university without an enduring commitment to the arts. As my friend, Andrew Sordoni, says, "The professional programs are important for the good of society, but the arts programs are important for the preservation of our civilization." Wilkes University wants to be part of that.

So, where do all of you come in? All of you are playing at least a small part in preserving and enhancing our civilization. You are producing works of art — poetry, plays, novels, films, memoirs — that allow us, as Shaw said, to see our souls. It is very important work.

Let me finish with this. President Kennedy, in my opinion our last poet president, said, "If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his [or her] vision wherever it takes him [or her]." That's what I hope this program does for each of you students. I hope it sets you free to follow your vision . . . wherever it takes you.

Thank you for your part in keeping the arts alive and well at Wilkes University.