



Patrick F. Leahy

Sordoni Art Gallery Rededication | October, 6 2017

Thank you, Tom. And thank you all for being here today. What an exciting day for Wilkes University and for Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

In 1963, President Kennedy visited another great American private higher education institution – Amherst College. He was there that day to dedicate a library to the late Robert Frost. At that event, the president asked, “What good is a private college or university unless it’s serving a great national purpose?”

Since our beginning, we at Wilkes have always paid heed to this challenge. In fact, our founding president, Dr. Eugene Farley, said that we would be a private institution with a public purpose.

That is, we would provide academic opportunity to the citizens of this Valley and increasingly beyond. And in the process, we would be a force for positive economic, cultural and social development in our community. No other project at Wilkes in recent history so exemplifies our fidelity to this founding mission than the rededication of the Sordoni Art Gallery.

Over the past five years, we have made \$50 million in investments in our campus for the benefit of our science and professional programs: a state-of-the-art Cohen Science Center for biology, chemistry and environmental engineering; a simulation lab and new space for the Passan School of Nursing; a new home for the Sidhu School of Business and Leadership; the recently dedicated Karambelas Media and Communication Center for communications; a significant renovation of Stark Learning Center for engineering; and more.

But as we invest in the professions, we remain committed to supporting the arts, too. You see, in my opinion, you can’t be a true university without an enduring commitment to the arts.

In order to improve the arts here at Wilkes, we developed a three-part strategy to reinvent the Sordoni Art Gallery. First, we re-established the position of Director of the Sordoni Art Gallery, a position that had been eliminated over the years. We conducted a national search to find someone who was academically qualified to become a tenure-track faculty member, someone who had experience actually operating a gallery and, if possible, someone who continued producing work as a practicing artist. It was an impossible task to find someone, even from a national pool, with all of these credentials. Yet we found that person in Heather Sincavage and brought her here to Wilkes.

Second, we built a permanent exhibition endowment that would allow us to bring in higher profile shows to the Gallery. Changing our model as a gallery was not without its detractors, but we have successfully created a dedicated endowment for the sole purpose of bringing in a wider variety of higher-end shows

from across the country and from around the world. That effort, along with fundraising over the years, has produced an endowment over \$1.3 million.

And third, we totally reconceptualized the physical location of the Gallery. This new space created a much larger exhibition room, with more and better storage space, with proper security and fire suppression, all of which would allow us to bring in these higher profile shows.

Then we placed the Gallery right on our Karambelas East Campus Gateway to be accessible to our students and right on South Main Street to be accessible to our neighbors. And in renovating existing space that was sitting underutilized, we continued to support Mayor George's downtown revitalization efforts in the process.

With the cutting of this ribbon in just a few minutes, I am proud to report that our three-part strategy to reinvent the visual arts at Wilkes University will be complete.

So how then is this private university serving a great national purpose? It is simple. We at Wilkes University are advancing the arts at a time when the arts are under siege in so many parts of our country. Through the new, expanded Sordoni Art Gallery, we will serve the arts interests in the Wyoming Valley in ways once thought unimaginable. And as we bring in bigger and bigger shows, we will attract visitors from farther and farther away, serving the arts interests throughout Northeast Pennsylvania and around the Commonwealth.

The Sordoni Art Gallery at Wilkes University is a gift to the people of Wilkes-Barre and of Pennsylvania, and we hope that everyone in this community will support it. Hosting an art gallery – like this one – is one of the many reasons why having a first-class university in your community is so valuable.

But there is an even more important purpose to the Sordoni Art Gallery – yes, even more important than serving the arts interests of this community. We aim, through this Gallery, to introduce the visual arts to a much wider group of people not yet converted to the arts.

In particular, we want to introduce the visual arts to the students we are privileged to serve here at Wilkes University. Today, 51 percent of our undergraduate students remain the first in their families to pursue a four-year college degree. Ninety-five percent of them come from public high schools. Half of them qualify for Federal and state grants due to high financial need. Consequently, many of our students have not been properly introduced to the arts, either at home or at school.

And it is our duty as educators to ensure our students get exposure, not just to the sciences and to the professions, but to the arts as well. Since I set foot on this campus five years ago, I've been saying – in defense of the liberal arts – that even our engineers should read Shakespeare. Now I can add that even our nurses and pharmacists should see Warhol.

As I said, it is an exciting day for Wilkes University and for Wilkes-Barre, Pa.

Let me close with this thought. During that same speech over 50 years ago at Amherst College, President Kennedy said this about the arts in America:

I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as it rewards achievement in business or statecraft. I look forward to an America which will steadily raise the standards of artistic

accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all. And I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world not only for its strength but for its civilization as well.

And he continued, “I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty.”

My hope is that the new Sordoni Art Gallery at Wilkes University will – for decades to come – make grace and beauty accessible to all of our citizens. My hope is that this private university will continue to serve a great national purpose of expanding the arts in America throughout the 21st century, just as President Kennedy envisioned so many years ago.

Thank you all for being a part of it.

Now it is my pleasure to introduce a representative of the Sordoni family to say a few words on this special occasion. Few people are more supportive of the arts in this community – and no one has been more supportive of the re-energized Sordoni Art Gallery – than Andrew Sordoni, III. On behalf of all of us assembled here, thank you, Andrew, for your unyielding support of the arts. Please join me in welcoming Andrew Sordoni to the podium.