



# Patrick F. Leahy

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Founder's Gala | May 30, 2015

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Thank you all for being here tonight to celebrate Wilkes University. I am delighted to have all of you here. When I became the president nearly three years ago, I studied up on my history. I began to realize that our 80-plus year history is filled with giants, all of whom helped to make this the place it is today. We decided that we should host one event a year that allows us to celebrate the rich history of this institution. Then, we came up with the idea to recognize at that event someone who has had a huge and positive impact on that history – subsequent “founders” if you will. The Board of Trustees gave me permission to establish a new award – our highest honor – to recognize individuals who represent the highest ideals of Wilkes University. It is called simply The President’s Medal. So, way back in the fall I approached long-time athletics director and legendary wrestling coach John Reese. I will be presenting the President’s Medal – for just the second time – to him. In the intervening months, as fate would have it, something remarkable happened in our wrestling program. So, before we proceed with the presentation of the President’s Medal, I’d like to make another special presentation. Matthew Grossmann from Lancaster, Pa., just completed his freshman year as a business major and as a wrestler for Coach Laudenslager. Matt had a good regular season, earning a spot in the NCAA Division III national championships, held this year in Hershey, Pa., near his hometown. On a weekend in March, Matt ran the table through his weight class to win Wilkes University’s first national championship in wrestling in 40 years. Matt, on behalf of Wilkes University, I would like to present to you the national championship ring to commemorate your historic achievement and to thank you for representing your university so well. Congratulations.

So, now let’s move on to the main event. When we started contemplating individuals who are deserving of this year’s President’s Medal, we had once again a large pool of individuals from which to choose. One name kept coming up again and again for his commitment to Wilkes and for how sustained this commitment has been over so many years. That name was John Reese. And, who can argue with this selection? His wrestling accomplishments are well-known: the second coach ever to reach the 500-win plateau, 8-time inductee into various Halls of Fame, Distinguished Member of the National Wrestling Hall of Fame. But, what we honor tonight is his 42 years of service to Wilkes as a coach and teacher, mentoring countless students along the way. We honor his many years of service as athletics director, growing the number of sports sponsored, including many women’s sports, and expanding the athletics facilities, in particular what is now the Ralston Athletic Complex. At last year’s homecoming, Wilkes alum and head basketball coach at Wisconsin, Bo Ryan, himself a decent coach, said of John Reese: “His wrestling team’s commitment to excellence made everyone at the university better.” We honor tonight John Reese’s lifelong commitment to Wilkes. With the full support of the entire community, I, Patrick Leahy, President of Wilkes University, am pleased to present to you, John Reese, the President’s

Medal – Wilkes University’s highest honor – which is bestowed annually on individuals whose personal and professional lives reflect the highest aspirations of Wilkes University. Congratulations!

## PRESIDENT’S REMARKS

Thank you, Coach Reese, and congratulations! Thank you all for being here tonight and for joining in our annual celebration of Wilkes University. Wow, what a great night! I am particularly pleased to have my wife, Amy, here tonight, who brings so much class to Wilkes. I’m also pleased to introduce my daughters, Grace and Molly, who join us at this event for the first time. Grace is now officially a junior in high school. I sat her down recently and told her regarding her college search that she can go to any university she wants, as long as it is in Wilkes-Barre. Since there’s only one university in Wilkes-Barre, I guess she’ll be coming to Wilkes.

And, Molly just finished 8th grade. In fact, she graduates from elementary school on Monday morning, so thank you all for coming to Molly’s graduation party. I’m also pleased to have my father and his wife, June, join us again this year. My dad and his twin brother were the first in the Leahy family to obtain college degrees. My Grandfather Leahy, who was never able to obtain a college education, insisted on it, saying, “If you get an education, you get a chance.” That’s a big part of what we are celebrating tonight: giving kids a chance. I also want to recognize a few other special guests who are here tonight. The members of our Board of Trustees started a tradition last year of inviting as their guests all of our newly tenured, newly promoted, and recently retired faculty members. As an educational institution, the heart of the matter is what happens in the classroom and in the labs, teachers and students working together on mutual discovery. It is these faculty members who give us our strong academic reputation. Would all of the newly tenured, promoted, and newest emeritus faculty members please stand so that we might recognize your commitment to Wilkes?

We started the Founder’s Gala last year 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 10 members of the Farley family here tonight. Would all of the members of the Farley family please rise so that we might recognize you? Just a couple weeks ago I received a visit from my friend and colleague, Dr. Harold Cox. He handed me a copy of something. “What is it,” I asked. “The great man’s memoirs,” he said. It was Dr. Farley’s memoir. What a treasure trove of information on Wilkes! In it, President Farley says: “I believe we should always recognize that it is the individual who gives substance and vitality to an institution.” My dad would say it another way: “Great people make great organizations.”

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 Darte, 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 will continue to inspire our actions. 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. Last year, we recognized Joe Savitz. Unfortunately, Joe couldn't be here tonight due to his own ill health, but I know you join me in wishing him well tonight. And, this year, of course, we honor John Reese. Thank you again, Coach Reese, for dedicating the one life you have to live to Wilkes.

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 Kyle McHale and Sierra Marsh. Thank you, Kyle and Sierra, for sharing your thoughts with us tonight. Very well-done. And, thanks to all of you, I'm proud that this year's dinner, as Mike suggested, has raised \$420,000 for the First Generation Fund. \$420,000. That's a big number for this area! But, why is this so significant for a university with a \$110 million annual operating budget? 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 Kyle and Sierra, there are countless examples of your money making a difference in students' lives. Take Crystal, whose father is a truck driver and who is working hard to put his daughter through college. Recently, her father needed a kidney transplant, so Crystal's mom donated her kidney. Both of them are on the road to recovery but have been out of work for some time. 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. Or, consider Imani, who spent her childhood in a refugee camp in the Congo. Her dad passed away two years ago, and her mother is unable to work. Her brother supports the family. Or, consider Amanda, who is the daughter of a drug-addicted mother and an alcohol-abusive father. She occupies her time studying and swimming. She said in her application: "These experiences have taught me what I want to become in life and what I do not want to become in life." Or, take Michael, whose parents work multiple jobs to make ends meet. He says, "I want to go to college for myself to enable me to work in a field I love and provide me a life without financial struggle. But, I also want to do it for my parents. I see them struggle day in and day out to make enough to pay the bills. I want to show them that their hard work has paid off. I hope that one day when I have a good job I can take care of my parents like they did for me." Or, finally, consider Shayleen, who is being raised by a single mom. She explains, "I never got to meet my father because his side of the family did not approve of a mixed-racial child." She continues, "If there is anything I could do to earn a scholarship, I would be willing to do it." How about this, Shayleen? All of us here tonight will get you the money to pay for a Wilkes education. All you have to do is work hard, get that degree, and spend the rest of your life fighting discrimination in our community. How's that for a deal? 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. 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. But, it's just not possible without resources. And that's why we host the Founder's Gala each year. On behalf of all 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

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 good 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 in this community, but in this nation. And, in so becoming, we can be a force – not just a participant, a force – for positive economic, social, and cultural development for the Wyoming Valley, for greater NEPA, for the Commonwealth of PA, 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." I look out over this gathering at all of you and I feel heartened 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.