On Becoming the 15th President of Shaw University

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Today, with such a welcome, I am reminded of that old Negro spiritual—“my Lord, what a morning/ my Lord, what a morning/ my Lord, what a morning/ when the stars begin to fall.”

Distinguished and honored guests, Shaw faculty, staff, administrators, talented students, alumni, the Baptist community, and my distinguished Board of Trustees, thank you all for welcoming me to the Shaw family and larger Raleigh community.

This is a momentous occasion for me. I stand before you at the pinnacle of the fulfillment of a long-time professional dream and personal passion of mine—to serve at the helm of a distinguished institution of higher education; but, more importantly, to be a part of the HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) tradition.

I am honored and privileged to be given the opportunity to lead an institution of Shaw’s caliber, with its deep history and rich tradition. I stand on the shoulders of giants, and walk in the footprints of greatness. I wish to thank my distinguished predecessor, Dr. Dorothy C. Yancy, whose strong stewardship over the last year has made my job that much easier.

As we stand two days away from remembering one of the most tragic events in American history (September 11), there should be little doubt that we are living in particularly challenging and, yes sometimes, troubling times.

We are faced with threats to our individual, economic, and national security in ways heretofore unknown. We are surrounded by, and subjected to, technology; the impact of its advances on our everyday lives and the ways in which it is shaping our society, makes the old adage, ‘the only thing constant is change itself,’ hold true to a degree we could not have imagined even three years ago. And yet, America, despite its imperfections, is still the land of miracles and opportunities.

Where else could a young girl who grew up in the housing projects of Chicago’s west side, the daughter of parents of modest origins: my father, the late Edward McClaurin of Georgetown,
Mississippi, who dropped out of school in the second grade to work so that his seven younger siblings would have enough to eat and could attend school.

And my mother, Ms. Bennie Pearl Brown, originally of Fulton, Alabama, who inspired me to persevere by returning to school at night to complete her high school education. We both graduated from high school in the same year. Neither of my parents could have imagined that their daughter would be standing before you today as the 15th president and the first woman to permanently lead Shaw University.iii I am indebted to my family (my brothers and sister) who believed in me, and to my children and friends who have supported my climb up this sometimes difficult ladder of success.

It is fitting that Shaw and I have found each other. What better place for me to serve than at an institution whose student body is comprised largely of first-generation college attendees, whose parents, I am sure, often wondered and worried about if their children would have the opportunities for success from which they themselves were barred.

Throughout this selection process and in my reading of Shaw’s distinguished history, I am struck by the number of stories I have heard or had retold to me that began, “…were it not for Shaw University….” These are narratives of remarkable achievements in the face of what some would consider opposing and enormous odds. And they culminate with a story of success, perseverance, faith, and an unwavering commitment to sustaining Shaw University.

It is my goal to carry forward this legacy, and indeed to build upon Shaw’s rich tradition of opening doors and creating even greater access and opportunities for those to whom none seemed available, until they happened upon Shaw.

To prepare Shaw students for the world of insecurity of which I spoke earlier, to enable them to confront and manage the constant technological, economic, and environment change and innovation of our times, “WE” must prepare them with the formal tools of critical reading, thinking and writing. And, “WE” must also prepare them to live and work in a world of ever-changing diversity, yet armed with the Shaw ethos and traditions of faith, high ethical practices, and a strong commitment to service and social justice. The future of this country, and the future direction of the world in which we live, rests with these students.

And who are the “WE?” It begins with all of us gathered here today, and radiates outward to those who could not join us but sent their well wishes, those who have observed Shaw from a distance watching, the skeptics, and the critics—all necessary elements for sustainable growth and development.

The “WE” also includes the faculty and staff, who are to be commended for having demonstrated an unwavering commitment to Shaw University in the best of times and during its most vulnerable moments.
The “WE” encompasses the larger Raleigh community comprised of businesses, foundations, and individuals with whom we must strengthen and deepen existing relationships, and build new strategic partnerships.

The “WE” entails Shaw’s Board of Trustees, who even in the face of difficult times, never ceased to believe that Shaw would come out stronger, and committed themselves to identifying leadership that would set Shaw on the path of ascendency and sustainability.

The “WE” are Shaw’s current students, and its future alumni, who are laying the foundation and sowing the seeds of possibilities and their success (which is also the institution’s success) at this very moment.

The “WE” are the parents of these students who entrust their intellectual and spiritual care to us during their time here.

And, ultimately the “WE” are Shaw’s illustrious alumni who number in the thousands, and who have gone forward to found other institutions of higher education and to become leaders in the religious and secular arenas of our society.

A university is only as strong as the legacy its alumni carry forth; a legacy that must be nurtured and nourished through the giving back of its alumni’s talent, as well as their financial contributions short term and long term. For it is in the proof of alumni who have “made it” upon leaving Shaw that builds the reputation of an institution, and attracts new students and stronger faculty and staff.

And, there is no contribution too small or too large necessary to invest in the future of sustaining Shaw University in the present, so that it may continue its work in the future. I have been told, from two very different sources, the story of “Shaw Day” at small Baptist churches throughout the south, where contributions ranging from pennies to dollars were collected to ensure that Shaw University, the oldest HBCU in the south, would thrive.

It is time to rekindle “Shaw Day,” but on a new, unprecedented, scale—to ask our friends, neighbors, local and national government, strangers, and even our critics, to invest in an institution that has proven itself over time, and simply asks for the opportunity to rise once more, like the mythical phoenix, and reclaim its rightful place as the institution that took in many whom the world thought unworthy of teaching, or whom many had given up on, or who were too poor to garner attention, and nurtured them, gave them a chance, believed in them, and raised them to new heights of accomplishments.

I have learned many lessons during my tenure in higher education, and as an anthropologist, I trained to always be in a “listening” and “learning” mode.

So for example, I have recently learned that the popular idea of what happens in Raleigh, stays in Raleigh, doesn’t necessarily apply here. I’m learning quickly that what happens in Raleigh is not...
likely to stay in Raleigh, and can be trusted to become the topic of discussion all over the world in a relatively short period of time. I am learning very quickly that there are very few secrets in Raleigh.

To close, let me say that I am mindful of the lessons the last decade, and especially the last five years, has taught us during a climate of eroding support for higher education. In particular, I am convinced that a measurement of any college or university’s success is the strength of the partnerships and collaborations it creates. In a word: relationships, relationships, relationships.

I am a firm believer that it is partners and collaborators (in the form of alumni, businesses, government, foundations, and interested individuals) that will serve as an ongoing body of advocates and cheerleaders on behalf of a university in the larger world during the best of times, but especially when it is vulnerable, and occasionally falters.

Thus, I look forward to a rich future of partnerships and collaborations with my new colleagues at Shaw University, the Shaw student body and alumni, my Board of Trustees, and my new Raleigh community. You are my new “relatives.” And, I warn you, like all relatives, we will have our moments of disagreements. But, that’s family!

What I humbly offer in exchange for you opening your hearts and your resources to build the Shaw University of the 21st century and forward are my own spirit and proven record of determination, creativity and innovation, energetic hard work, courage, and optimism to succeed, regardless of the odds. I humbly offer Shaw University and the Raleigh community my service and dedication as the 15th president of this institution.

It has been a long journey: from the projects on Chicago’s west side, to the cornfields of Iowa, around the world to India, over the hills of Massachusetts, to the bush of Belize, Central America, through the streets of Paramaribo, Surinam, across the traffic of New York, to the cold of the Twin Cities of Minnesota, and now to the warmth of North Carolina. I have journeyed far, but I feel as if I am finally home.

I am buoyed by your faith in me. I am ready! I have never been converted to a Gator (U of Florida), or a gopher (U of Minnesota) but I like the idea of becoming a “BEAR!

Thank you all for welcoming me into the Shaw family. Together we will sail this ship over troubled waters and over calm seas, but together. WE ARE FAMILY.

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1 http://www.negrospirituals.com/news-song/my_lord_what_a_morning.htm
2 Dr. Dorothy C. Yancy served as Interim president of Shaw for fourteen months and is the first woman ever, interim or permanent, to have served as President of Shaw University.