

Ohio
Wesleyan
University

OWU PRESIDENT ROCK JONES CONVOCATION REMARKS

Thursday, August 22, 2013

2013 CONVOCATION REMARKS

**Rock Jones, President of Ohio Wesleyan University
August 22, 2013**

Good afternoon and welcome to this Convocation launching a new academic year and marking the matriculation of the Ohio Wesleyan Class of 2017. We are thrilled that you have chosen Ohio Wesleyan, and we are delighted to welcome you on this very special day.

Today, you take your place on a campus that is rich in history and deep in its commitment to the liberal arts. For more than 170 years, students have gathered beneath these ancient trees and within the walls of the historic buildings that surround us today. They accepted the opportunity for an education that would prepare them for lives of leadership and service, while also introducing them to the capacities and sensibilities that ensure the full flourishing of their human potential.

Our commitment to the liberal arts lies at the core of our institutional being. Never in our history has the need for a liberal arts education been more urgent than it is today. Our world is starving for leaders whose minds have been challenged, sharpened, and formed by study of history and literature; by refined appreciation for beauty and creativity expressed in the arts; by a curiosity that seeks greater understanding of the structures of societies, the composition of the natural world, the rituals and ideas that shape human cultures, and the relationships between human beings and other forms of life with whom we share this precious planet. You have the rare luxury over the next four years of allowing yourself to become immersed in these important considerations.

Along the way, you will be challenged to develop capacities that will serve you well in life. You will be challenged to think independently, critically, and analytically. You will be challenged to form and present a persuasive argument, both as a writer and as a speaker, while also being challenged to listen carefully, critically, and empathetically to fellow students whose conclusions may differ from your own. You will be challenged to explore and understand cultures different from your own.

Here at OWU, you will be challenge to make connections between theory and practice, between the theoretical lessons of the classroom and practical experiences in the real world. You will do this individually through a variety of experiences, ranging from internships to undergraduate research to field study to travel learning. You then will bring those experiences back to the classroom, where you will be joined by fellow students who have had different but equally important experiences beyond the walls of the classroom, the boundaries of the campus, and, in many cases, the borders of this country.

Collectively, we will think about complex issues that challenge all of us and will be left in the hands of your generation to solve. Toward that end, you will be challenged to consider the interdisciplinarity of knowledge and to explore significant problems from the perspectives of multiple disciplines. I encourage you to participate in a Course Connection network toward this end. I especially encourage you to participate in the Sagan National

Colloquium, which brings the entire University into a reflection on and consideration of an issue of pressing importance for our society and for our future. This year, we explore the Interdisciplinary Impacts of Climate Change. Next year, we explore the challenges of the growing scarcity of water on our planet. Your generation will be confronted by these challenges. Ohio Wesleyan will help prepare you to address them.

Your generation will be confronted by the continuing challenges that divide people against one another as nations, cultures, religious groups, political bodies, and more. Our curriculum challenges you to think deeply about these matters. The composition of our student body enhances that consideration. Your class includes students from 20 countries. Nearly 30 percent of the domestic students in your class are students of color. You represent a rainbow of religious diversity and life experiences. You are the most diverse class in OWU history. This gives you a special advantage as you prepare to live in a world where understanding and embracing diversity will be more important than ever.

Your education at Ohio Wesleyan begins in the classroom but extends to the playing fields of athletic competition, to the stages and studios of artistic creativity and performance, to the residence halls where you build communities with people you did not know before your arrival here, to the organizations where you will share common purpose and accept leadership and responsibility, to the places where you will engage in volunteer service, to the times and places where you will be challenged to consider the values that shape your life and the aspirations to which you will devote your life. No two of you will have the same OWU experience. Each of you will create your own pathway through this place, and many of you will do it in ways that leave OWU changed forever, for the good.

Along the way, you will face many decisions. Some of these relate to the choice of a major and the selection of courses. Some relate to which activities you will pursue, knowing no one can do everything. Some relate to how you conduct yourself, how you treat the people around you, and how you treat your own body. You will have unprecedented freedom. I challenge you to make responsible choices, to hold yourself accountable, and to accept the responsibility of a community by holding those around you accountable. Today you receive the torch that is passed from generation to generation on a campus that celebrates diversity, values responsibility, and expects the best of every person here.

Ohio Wesleyan seeks to prepare the next generation of moral leaders for a global society. OWU has a long history of preparing educated citizens who accept the mantle of leadership and with that mantle help shape the communities and organizations where they live and work and, in some cases, the very structures of our human society. It was Sherwood Rowland, an Ohio Wesleyan graduate, who first discovered that chlorofluorocarbons, commonly known as Freon and used in aerosol applications, contribute to ozone depletion. He received massive resistance when he presented his research findings. Today, the findings are beyond question, inform our understanding of consequences of ozone depletion on all forms of life as well as the physical world, and have helped shape important public policy. The Nobel laureate whose life work produced this understanding and who had the courage to stand by his findings learned the basics of science and the foundations for moral leadership as a student at Ohio Wesleyan.

I hope you have seen the movie "42." It is the story of Branch Rickey and the partnership

that led to Jackie Robinson taking the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers in the spring of 1947. But the story began more than four decades earlier.

In the spring of 1903, the Ohio Wesleyan baseball team, coached by a student named Branch Rickey, traveled to South Bend to play the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame. When the team arrived at its hotel in South Bend, one of the players, Charles “Tommy” Thomas, was told he could not stay in the hotel. Everyone knew why – Charles Thomas was African American. After a contentious encounter between Rickey and the clerk, the clerk agreed for Thomas to stay in Rickey’s room. Hundreds of times in the years that followed, Rickey told the story of his experience that day and of the commitment he made, as a student at Ohio Wesleyan, that someday he would do something about this dark cloud of racial injustice in our society.

In the spring of 1947, more than four decades after the event in South Bend, nearly a decade before the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, and nearly two decades before Congress acted in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Branch Rickey opened the doors of Major League Baseball and invited the courageous Jackie Robinson to break the color barrier of America’s pastime. As “42” reminded us with the famous portrayal of Rickey and Robinson alone together in the locker room following the well-documented racially motivated incident of Robinson being spiked by an opposing player, Rickey often said it all started with that experience in the lobby of a hotel in South Bend in 1903 and a commitment he made as a student at Ohio Wesleyan.

As you begin your journey here, I challenge you to keep your mind open to the commitments you make. The college years are the season of life for making commitments that can shape the remainder of your life and, perhaps, even the world around you and the structure of that world. You don’t have to know the details. Branch Rickey did not know in 1903 when or how he would fulfill the commitment he made on this campus. But he knew the ugly face of injustice, and he knew his life would confront that social demon.

You have been selected for admission to this University because of our confidence in your capacity to embrace a liberal arts education and succeed here, and because of our confidence in your capacity to become a moral leader in a global society.

Finally, a word to parents, families, and friends: Today is a day you have anticipated, looked forward to, and dreaded for nearly two decades. This is no small day for you. We at Ohio Wesleyan understand that today you are entrusting to us the greatest of your life work. Your students are ready for this day, at least for the most part. And even with the emotions you may feel, I am confident you, too, are ready, at least for the most part. Know that we honor the deep trust you have placed in us.

Class of 2017, welcome to OWU. It is a great day to be a Bishop.