BALL STATE UNIVERSITY
Office of the President

**GEOFFREY S. MEARNS**
**FALL CONVOCATION**
**EMENS AUDITORIUM**
**AUGUST 16, 2024**
**9:00 A.M.**

Good morning, everyone. Thank you, Dr. Marri.

I am grateful for your leadership and your support.

To all of this year's award recipients, congratulations. Your contributions are valued and appreciated. Let's take another moment to express our appreciation and our admiration to our colleagues.

Before I begin my remarks, I also want to express my appreciation to my wife, Jennifer.

She is a source of strength. She is consistently a voice of optimism. Thank you.

Now, to you—our faculty and staff—thank you for joining me this morning. I am grateful for your service and your support.

This year, I begin my eighth academic year. Today, and every day, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to serve you as the president of Ball State University.

I am also fortunate to stand before you, once again, and to share that we have so much to celebrate as a University. So many reasons to be proud. So many reasons to be grateful.

These past twelve months have been filled with many accomplishments, some of which I'll share with you this morning. And throughout this past year, all of you have made contributions that allow us to transform the lives of our students and to elevate our communities.

As we embark on this new year together, we do so with confidence and optimism for our bright future.

But before we celebrate some of our successes, let's pause for a moment to acknowledge our losses. This past year, and more recently, we have lost some

beloved colleagues, both retired and some who still worked alongside of us. We also lost graduates—from many years ago and others more recently.

In honor of their legacies, let their lives serve as enduring inspiration for our work.

I also want to acknowledge that our optimism is tempered by some uncertainty and some anxiety. We are facing some profound challenges. A little later in my remarks, I will talk about some of these challenges—and how we can respond to them.

But let me give you a preview of that portion of my remarks. I am confident that we will overcome these challenges. Indeed, I believe that we have an opportunity to help our students, our colleagues, and our communities solve some of these systemic problems.

This confidence stems from several factors.

First, we embark upon an uncertain future from a position of strength.

One important aspect of this strong foundation is our enrollment.

For the second consecutive year, more than 3,700 new undergraduate freshmen will join us on Monday. That number is equivalent to our pre-pandemic ten-year average. And it's 400 more new freshmen compared to Fall 2021—just three years ago.

This Fall's freshman class is well prepared. The average high school GPA for these students is 3.56.

And this class is also very diverse. Approximately 29 percent are first generation college students, 46 percent are Pell-eligible, and 30 percent are underrepresented minority students.

These numbers are particularly impressive when you consider two factors that we couldn't control.

The first factor is the decline in the number of high school graduates in our state who choose to go to college.

In 2017, 63 percent of Indiana high school graduates enrolled in college the following Fall. Since the pandemic, that percentage has declined and remained stalled at 53 percent. That's a ten-percentage point decline!

The second factor is the headwind that all colleges and universities faced this past year as a result of the federal government's flawed rollout of the revised FAFSA application.

Each year, as you probably know, we require our new undergraduate students to confirm their intent to enroll by making a deposit on or before May 1st.

This year, though, because of the "FAFSA fiasco," we moved that deadline to June 1st, because we weren't able to provide our prospective students with their financial aid packages until May 1st.

And in a typical year, once we have completed the necessary calculations and made our aid decisions, it takes the staff in our financial aid office at least three days to assemble all the award letters.

But on May 1st, in order to expedite that process, Paula Luff invited people to assist her team by volunteering to stuff the envelopes—approximately 11,000 envelopes.

Because so many of you responded to Paula's invitation, the work was completed in just five hours.

I am grateful to Paula and her team—and to everyone who pitched in that day. As this experience illustrates, we overcome challenges, both large and small, by working together. That's the Ball State way!

Indeed, because of the collective effort of our faculty and staff in every college and in every division, our enrollment across all dimensions—undergraduate, graduate, international, online—has fully recovered from the significant adverse impact of the pandemic. In fact, our total Fall enrollment this year will have approximately 1,000 more students than Fall 2022.

One positive factor is our retention rates.

Approximately 78 percent of the students who enrolled as freshmen last Fall are registered for classes again this Fall. That retention rate is equivalent to our pre-pandemic average—and it's nearly six percentage points higher than the Fall 2020 freshman cohort.

This good news about enrollment, along with our ongoing commitment to fiscal discipline, has enabled us to consistently produce positive operating margins every year, despite the significant adverse impact of the pandemic. These positive operating margins stand in stark contrast to the financial performances of many institutions all across the country.

Valparaiso University recently announced that, because of a $9 million budget deficit, it will eliminate 30 academic programs and lay off full-time faculty. They're also planning to sell some of the art in their museum to fund capital projects.

This unfortunate story is common among many private institutions and some comprehensive public universities. But budget deficits also are increasingly common among some of the most prominent public research universities in the country.

For example, last Fall, West Virginia University revealed that it had an operating deficit of $35 million—which would grow to $75 million, unless it took some drastic action. So, they're eliminating academic programs and terminating faculty.

In 2023, Rutgers University had an annual operating deficit of more than $88 million.

Penn State University is implementing a plan to reduce its annual operating budget by $94 million to address a systemic operating deficit.

And a few months ago, the University of Arizona announced that, in the next two years, its annual operating deficit will be more than $170 million. So, they're laying off faculty and staff and reducing institutional financial aid for their students.

I take no pleasure in reading these stories. They are the product of declining state support for public higher education and increasing skepticism about the value of a college degree—and the lack of prudent fiscal management.

In contrast, because of an increase in our state operating appropriation, a rebound in our enrollment, and our fiscal discipline, we have the resources to invest in people.

For example, over the last two years, we have hired more than 150 new full-time faculty.

As a result of these investments, our student-faculty ratio has improved from 17:1 in Fall 2017, the year I arrived, to 15:1 this year. That statistic is a reflection of our commitment to our core academic mission and to the success of our students.

We are also fortunate that our generous alumni and benefactors continue to invest in our people and our programs.

For the sixth consecutive year, our University received more than $30 million in new philanthropic gifts and commitments. Prior to this streak, we had never raised $30 million in two consecutive years.

This past year, we raised more than $79 million—another all-time fundraising record for our University.

Our recent fundraising success was energized in October by the public launch of our comprehensive fundraising campaign.

The goal of this campaign—the most ambitious in our history—is to raise more than $350 million. Already, we have raised $300 million across three major philanthropic pillars.

The first pillar is generating financial support for our students. These philanthropic investments will fund scholarships to enable us to recruit students and to provide emergency grants and loans that will enable more of our students to retain, persist, and graduate.

The second pillar is expanding our academic programs and high-impact practices to enhance the student experience.

For example, three donors are funding the pilot of our new student philanthropy program. The goal of the program is to expose our students to the benefits of philanthropy. In its first year, more than 120 students took a course in

which they acted as grant makers with community partners, determining how to distribute donor funds.

Our third campaign pillar will generate philanthropic investments in our facilities. Across our campus, you can see the manifestation of the generosity of our donors.

The Alderdice Gates are our newest campus landmark. They are located at the southern terminus of our James W. Lowe East Mall. Patrick Alderdice is a graduate of our Miller College of Business.

Another graduate of that college, Charlie Brown, funded our Brown Family Amphitheater.

One of the highlights of the past year for me was the dedication ceremony for this new outdoor performance venue.

Charlie and his wife, Louise, participated in the ribbon cutting last September. The ceremony was followed by a concert featuring our Jazz Ensemble and Tatum Langley, who graduated from Ball State in 2021.

It was a wonderful evening. It showcased the talent of our students, while demonstrating how philanthropy enhances our campus.

Soon, we will demonstrate how the generosity of another Ball State graduate allows us to enhance how we support our student-athletes.

In May, our Board of Trustees approved the construction of our Eric Foss Championship Performance Center.

This new strength and conditioning facility will be located next to Worthen Arena and the Shondell Practice Center. The performance center is named after Mr. Foss, who contributed $4 million for the facility, which will serve all of our student-athletes, except our football players.

We also continue to raise private philanthropic support for our Performing Arts Center.

So far, we have raised approximately $50 million for the PAC, which is the catalyst for our ambitious plan to revitalize The Village.

In November, we will have a ground-breaking ceremony for the PAC. That will be a special day.

I am grateful to Jean Crosby and our colleagues in the Foundation who, year after year, help generate these philanthropic investments.

I am also grateful to the Lilly Endowment.

In February 2023, the Endowment announced a new $300 million initiative—the Campus and Community Collaboration program. All 35 public and private colleges and universities were eligible to submit proposals.

Last December, the Endowment announced that our University was awarded $35 million—the largest grant in the entire CCC initiative and the largest single gift in our University's history.

The majority of the Lilly grant will fund the design and construction of the PAC. But the Lilly grant will also accelerate the construction of several other buildings in The Village, including the new boutique hotel, which will be called The Cantio.

In Latin, the word "cantio" means song. It's a fitting name for a hotel that will welcome visitors who attend our students' performances in the PAC, which is connected to The Cantio. The PAC is a tangible demonstration of our commitment to our outstanding Department of Theatre and Dance.

Across campus, we are also investing in other distinctive programs.

Undergraduate enrollment in our Estopinal College of Architecture and Planning has grown for eight consecutive years. Approximately 1,200 students are presently registered for classes in ECAP. And next year, we will begin renovating the architecture building, creating three new studio spaces to serve more students in the college.

That project is part of our North Campus Renovation Project, which will be completed in Summer 2026. The project includes renovations to our University Theatre Building, the Arts and Communications Building, and the Hargreaves Music Building. We received more than $81 million from the state to complete these important projects.

We are grateful to the General Assembly and to Governor Holcomb for providing the financial resources that allow us to restore and modernize these facilities, all of which are more than 40 years old.

I am also grateful to Rich Berthy. Rich donated $1 million—a gift that will enable us to expand the Ball Honors House.

Because of his generosity, we are able to construct new classrooms and offices to accommodate the growth of our Honors College. Next week, approximately 620 new freshmen will enroll in our Honors College. Just five years ago, only 330 new students enrolled in the Honors College. This year's class represents the largest and the most diverse honors class in the 65-year history of the college, and one of the most academically accomplished, with a median high school GPA of 4.06.

The College of Health is forging new partnerships to support an increase in pre-nursing majors.

One of the college's biggest challenges is accommodating the clinical experiences students need to earn their nursing degrees. This past year, the college worked with Reid Health in Richmond and Parkview Health in Fort Wayne to create more clinical opportunities for our students. We also increased the number of clinical placements at IU Health Ball Memorial Hospital.

In our Teachers College, we are exploring new ways to grow our teacher pipeline to address Indiana's critical teacher shortage.

The college is funding dual-credit tuition for high school students, mentoring students in its teacher apprenticeship programs, and providing professional development opportunities for current high school teachers.

In January, at a men's basketball game, seven high school students participated in a signing ceremony where they declared their intent to pursue their teaching degrees at Ball State this Fall.

These future Cardinals were among 40 high school students involved in our Flight Path to Teaching Adventure Camp. Now in its second year, the program is a free summer workshop experience for rising high school students who are interested in exploring college and a career in teaching.

Programs like these are a win for our future teachers—and for our faculty preparing them for careers in the classroom.

Our University's impact increasingly depends on our ability to prepare students for the rapidly evolving world they will enter when they graduate.

This Fall, our College of Communication, Information, and Media will offer an introductory course in artificial intelligence. Graduates from our College of Health are collaborating with faculty to educate students about how to use AI to treat and bill patients. And this past Spring, our Institute for Digital Intermedia Arts taught our first course in extended reality—or XR.

In addition to being agile, we must continue to innovate and collaborate so that we can respond to the changing needs of our students and our state.

Last Fall, we became Indiana's only public university to offer an undergraduate business degree in management and leadership. Our Miller College of Business also created a master's degree in business analytics and an accounting course in financial analytics.

Our College of Sciences and Humanities revitalized its undergraduate computer science program so that students can specialize in high-demand fields, including cybersecurity and app development. As a result of these changes, freshman enrollment increased 68 percent. The college also developed a new comprehensive undergraduate program in forensic science—the only program of its kind in Indiana. More than 50 students are enrolled in the introductory course this Fall.

Our College of Fine Arts has also established several new interdisciplinary programs. CFA partnered with CCIM to offer a concentration in visual effects and motion graphics. This program allows art students to take video and audio production classes, while media students can take 3-D animation courses.

CFA also developed a joint program in game design and development with the College of Sciences and Humanities. Students in this program use our new

game production studio to workshop their ideas, start companies, and then release the video games they create for commercial distribution.

Collaboration also remains at the heart of our distinctive partnership with Muncie Community Schools.

In just six short years, our MCS partners have stabilized enrollment. In fact, for the first time in a generation, enrollment is increasing, year over year.

In these first six years, MCS has eliminated the previous systemic operating budget deficits, reduced long-term debt, and substantially increased reserves.

As a result, in just six short years, MCS has been able to increase teacher compensation by nearly 40 percent and invest more than $60 million in new and renovated facilities.

I am grateful to all of our MCS partners—teachers, staff, administrators, and the MCS board—for their commitment and dedication.

I am also grateful to Susanna Benko and Andrew Gatza, two of our colleagues from CSH. This past year, they served as professional development liaisons at Northside Middle School. In this role, they help prepare our students to be teachers, and they provide support and guidance to current MCS teachers.

Now I'd like to tell you about how we collaborate with external partners to share our expertise with our community—and our country.

In anticipation of the total solar eclipse that passed over Indiana on April 8, campus partners began meeting last Fall to prepare for the event. And on that historic day, our team used telescopes from our Brown Planetarium to provide views of the eclipse to an online audience of millions of people around the world.

Our telescope feed was also shown on a screen in Times Square and on giant screens at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, where more than 50,000 people watched the day's events.

Because of our team, people on campus and around the world witnessed a remarkable natural phenomenon.

I've shared several examples that illustrate the wide range of our academic majors and degree programs. The quality and distinctiveness of these programs is why students attend our University, so that they are empowered to pursue fulfilling careers and to lead meaningful lives after they graduate.

Over the past year, approximately 4,800 women and men earned their degrees from Ball State.

One of those graduates was Feona Dobson, an Honors College student who majored in biochemistry and pre-medicine.

Like many of our students, Feona was the first in her family to attend college. She received a prestigious Whitinger Scholarship, which changed the trajectory of her life.

Feona was inspired by many faculty members, including David Bwambok and Tim Berg. Another person who influenced Feona was Shelly Lopota, one of our custodians.

Feona met Shelly during the late nights Feona spent studying in our Foundational Sciences Building. Through these encounters, Feona said, in her own words, "our friendship blossomed."

In an online tribute about her college experience, Feona recognized Shelly's work on behalf of Ball State. She wrote: "Not many people realize the hard labor of custodians and service workers."

Like Feona, we all appreciate the women and men who provide us with a beautiful place to work, to live, and to study.

Let's, once again, acknowledge the efforts of our colleagues who are responsible for enabling all of us to do our jobs.

In February, I met with our staff council. I provided a brief update, and the members of the council shared some of their thoughts and concerns with me. It was a productive conversation.

At the end of our conversation, Dee Hoffman, who served as the chair of the council last year, gave me a gift from the council. It was these beautiful cuff links and a matching tie bar. They're made from recycled Ball canning jars.

I am grateful to Dee and her colleagues for this thoughtful gift—and for their dedicated service to our University. They are valued, generous colleagues.

The story I shared about Feona Dobson inspires me.

Her story is a reminder that each one of us has the power to make a positive difference in the lives of other people. And it demonstrates how, throughout her time here, one of our students found ways to bring our University's enduring values to life.

For Feona, those values include courage to engage with a stranger and gratitude for that friend's contributions to our mission.

I want to recognize two more students whose actions embody the values represented by *Beneficence*.

Hannah Dukeman and Emma Eubank are Ball State softball players. Last year, they took advantage of the NCAA's new name, image, likeness policy to raise funds and awareness for pediatric cancer.

The young women auctioned off custom cleats they wore during games. The proceeds were donated to St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Indianapolis. In recognition of their innovative approach to cancer advocacy, they were named Advocates of the Year by *Money Talks*, a non-profit magazine.

Crystal Evans, the president of *Money Talks*, described Emma and Hannah's work as athletes, students, and advocates as "heroic and selfless."

I am proud of Emma, Hannah, and all our student-athletes who represent our University with character and integrity. They also excel in competition and in the classroom.

Last year, our teams won four conference championships. And last Fall, our Cardinals earned a collective GPA of 3.44—the highest in our history. Approximately 57 percent of our student-athletes made the dean's list. One of those student-athletes was Jenelle Rogers.

Jenelle is a track star. She is a three-time, first-team All American. And her cumulative GPA is 3.94.

This Summer, Jenelle was very busy. As an interior design major, she was an intern at CSO Architects in Indianapolis. During her internship, though, she took a couple of breaks—first, in June, to compete in the Olympic Trials in Oregon, and then in July to represent the United States in a competition in Germany.

I am proud of the accomplishments and the contributions of our student-athletes on and off the field.

I am also very proud of the more than 30 students who received national and international scholarships last year. Three students earned NCAA post-graduate scholarships and three students received National Science Foundation fellowships. One student earned a Goldwater scholarship.

For the first time in our history, several Ball State students received prestigious Boren Scholarships for international study. And six Ball State graduates received Fulbright awards to spend next year abroad teaching English.

For the fourteenth year in a row, Ball State won the annual Indiana Speech Tournament.

Our varsity e-sports team is ranked as the ninth most competitive collegiate team in the country.

Professor Jennifer Blackmer's play *I Carry Your Heart With Me* won two awards as one of the country's best new plays.

Last year, 148 of our nursing graduates took the national exam to become registered nurses. Their pass rate was 93 percent—eight percentage points higher than last year and six percentage points above the national average.

Faculty from our College of Sciences and Humanities obtained 65 research awards totaling more than $5 million.

Our online master's degree in special education is ranked ninth in the Nation and our online MBA program is ranked twelfth in the Nation.

Enrollment in our online master's degree in applied behavior analysis is 25 percent larger than last year. This program now captures 20 percent of the entire national market of board-certified behavior analysts.

Our ABA program is an excellent example of how we are responding to the ever-changing expectations of our students. Our commitment to innovation will continue to define our success in the second century of our University.

Another example of our responsive, creative culture is our commitment to undergraduate student success. Only a few years ago, we created a task force to develop a comprehensive plan. Today, we have more than 60 advisors and student success coaches. And we have student success centers in every college.

Our colleges also continue to implement curriculum changes that will enable us to achieve our ambitious student success goals.

For example, more than 580 students in the College of Fine Arts took one of three courses offered last year in the SOAR program. These courses help students acclimate to campus and gain a better understanding of career pathways in the arts.

From observing this work, I have come to admire how all of you appreciate that it is our professional responsibility—and our moral obligation—to support student success. As a result, we are excelling at this work. Thank you.

Excellence is one of the enduring values that defines the distinctive culture of our University.

These enduring values were articulated in our strategic plan, *Destination 2040: Our Flight Path*. That plan established a series of strategic imperatives that we have been implementing in order to make measurable progress towards our five goals by 2024. Now, it is time to update that long-term plan.

So, a few months ago, I appointed a small, representative group of faculty, staff, a student, a graduate, and a community member to serve on our strategic planning committee.

I don't anticipate that the committee will recommend that we make material changes to the mission, enduring values, and the five strategic goals. Rather, I anticipate that we will focus on refining the strategic imperatives that will guide our work through 2030.

This Fall, you will have many opportunities to participate in our consultative planning process. Some of you will be asked to serve on one of our working groups. And all of you will have the opportunity to respond to a survey and to attend one of five open forums.

Please participate. We want your ideas.

Then, early in next calendar year, we will distribute a draft plan for additional feedback.

Our goal is to present the final proposed plan to the Board of Trustees at its meeting in May 2025.

When *Destination 2040* was approved by the Board in December 2018, we reaffirmed our long-standing commitment to the enduring value of "inclusiveness."

We define inclusiveness as our commitment "to respect and embrace equity, inclusion, and diversity in people, ideas, and opinions."

Over the Summer, I created our Council on Inclusiveness. I have asked Stephanie Simon-Dack to serve as chair of the Council, and Charlene Alexander and Kristen McCauliff to serve as vice chairs.

The Council will develop and recommend the programs, practices, and policies that enable our University to enhance and expand our commitment to this enduring value. The Council will build upon the progress that we have made in Inclusive Excellence and Freedom of Expression by merging these important initiatives into a comprehensive plan.

The work of the Council is a reflection of our sustained commitment to inclusiveness, as well as a means to comply with one of the provisions of Senate Bill 202.

As I told our trustees in March, complying with this new law does not require us to retreat from our enduring commitment to "inclusiveness."

To the contrary, we will sustain our commitment to this enduring value—our commitment to cultural diversity and our complementary commitments to freedom of expression and academic freedom. We will sustain that commitment, because that is who we are. And that is who we will continue to be.

I will be honest, though, this work will not be easy. Well, it's never been easy. It's always required discipline and determination—persistence and patience.

But today, there seem to be more people who question the importance of this work. And that's a challenge for all of us who believe in the value of a college degree and who are proud of the culture that we nurture on our campus.

Beyond our campus, there are other profound challenges facing our country. Income equality. Poor health outcomes. Entrenched political divisions.

I can understand why many people feel uncertain, even anxious about the future. That anxiety is especially acute during contentious election campaigns.

And I can understand why these challenges create anxiety, particularly if you feel powerless to contribute to the solutions.

But I believe that we—at <u>this</u> university—we are <u>not</u> powerless.

We <u>can</u>—we must—play a constructive role to solve these problems.

But first, we must believe that we have the ability to make a difference. When the world is divided, when other people are hostile, we must choose to be optimistic—to be hopeful.

I've been thinking about these issues for some time now. In May, I shared some of my thoughts with some of you at a meeting in the Alumni Center.

Last Fall, I read an article by David Brooks. The title of the article was "How America Got Mean."

In the introduction to the article, Mr. Brooks asked two questions that many of us have been asking ourselves and each other.

The first question is "Why have Americans become so sad?" The second question is "Why have Americans become so mean?"

We have seen these emotions in some of our students and some of our colleagues—and some of our friends and neighbors. Some people inflame these emotions, as opposed to proposing solutions.

Mr. Brooks offers a simple answer to these questions. He wrote that we have become sad, alienated, and rude because:

"We inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained in how to treat others with kindness and consideration."

He proposed that educators, including at colleges and universities, provide what he calls "moral formation."

This phrase isn't about a particular religion. It's not even about any religion at all.

It's about values and character.

Mr. Brooks defines the term "moral formation" as consisting of three elements. The first element is helping people to learn how "to restrain their selfishness"—how to be good friends and good colleagues.

The second element is "teaching basic social and ethical skills." For example, how to welcome a neighbor into the community or how to go about disagreeing with someone constructively.

The third element is "helping people find a purpose in life" by "providing pathways toward a meaningful existence."

When I read this article, it resonated with me—because it sounded like us!

Like our mission statement. Like our enduring values. Like our distinctive programs, including immersive learning and the student philanthropy project.

In essence, it is who we are and who we aspire to be.

The article prompted me to wonder: Can we do what we do even better? Can we do this important work with more strategic intentionality?

These questions led me to engage Tim States, who is an experienced educator and administrator—and a good person.

During his engagement, I met with Tim from time to time. We often talked about why we should help our students explore their purpose. The reason is quite simple and compelling: because our students need it.

Our society has created conditions for many students to arrive at college in a performance-driven mindset—to focus on success, not fulfillment. Mr. Brooks believes that it's this focus on ambition and success that impedes a young person's desire and capacity to cultivate the inner virtues that are necessary to build a life of meaning.

In his report, Tim concluded that our University is already doing many things to foster purpose exploration with our students. This work, he wrote, has "embedded itself into the DNA of Ball State." In fact, our mission already articulates this element: we prepare our students for fulfilling careers and meaningful lives.

Now, as Tim observed, we are poised to expand our pathways to purpose, which are rooted in Beneficence.

I have had time to reflect on Tim's observations. And I have shared his report with many of you and with our trustees.

I am very encouraged.

Because we're not starting from scratch. To the contrary, we already have the right campus culture—and the necessary foundational values and many relevant programs.

We also have faculty and staff who are eager to enhance our commitment to help our students find purpose within their chosen profession. For example, faculty in the Miller College of Business are teaching a course this Fall titled "The Beneficence of Business." This course will engage students in learning how businesses can help solve societal problems.

What we must do now, working together, is figure out how to organize and operationalize our University's "purpose project" in a strategic, coordinated way.

It's an ambitious project. But it's one that gives me hope—hope for a brighter future.

"Hope" was the same word on my mind in February, after I left the memorial service for someone who influenced my career—and my life.

Michael Schwartz was the president of Kent State University from 1982 to 1991. He then served as the president of Cleveland State University where, in 2005, he recruited me from private practice to become the law school dean.

Since then, my relationship with Mike evolved from him being my president, to being my mentor, to becoming my dear friend.

Mike was the person who strongly encouraged me to apply to become president at Ball State. His influence is one of the principal reasons that I stand before you today.

Mike died in December, following a long illness. In February, Cleveland State and Kent State held a joint memorial program for him, and I drove to Cleveland to attend the program.

The program ended with a eulogy from Mike's son, Ken. Ken described one of the last conversations he had with his father, when Mike knew that he didn't have much longer to live.

Mike said to his son: "There's still too much meanness, too much fear, too much bullying and hatred toward the color of people's skin, where they were born,

their gender, who and how they may choose to love, or how they may or may not worship a higher power."

And Mike asked Ken: "Did we fail? Are we failing?"

These are tough questions to ask your son in your final days. But even as he lay dying, Mike was an optimist. So he reverted to the inspirational, empathetic teacher he had long been to answer his own questions.

Mike said: "What's happening now will pass. It will take a lot of work by a lot of strong people. But the long arc of history bends inevitably towards enlightenment, liberty, and justice. Universities will drive that arc, because a university is the only place in society where we search for the many truths that may exist."

Ken ended his eulogy by encouraging us to celebrate his father's career and his life by "acting to ensure the freedom to teach, to research, and to study in search of the many truths that may exist. It's to combat meanness with kindness—and education. It's to bring people together to celebrate our differences."

Ken said, when we do this work at our universities, Mike Schwartz will be honored, "because another life has been changed."

Mike's life and Ken's words are a call to action for those of us committed to the life-changing promise of our profession. They remind us that we have the power—and the obligation—to overcome the current challenges.

A few months later, I was inspired by a similar message of hope—this time in a commencement address delivered to the graduating class of Yale Law School.

The commencement speaker was Damian Williams, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York. For the past year, my son, Geoffrey, served as Mr. Williams' special assistant, and Geoffrey attended the commencement ceremony with his boss.

As I listened to Mr. Williams' commencement address, I gained a new appreciation for my son's good fortune to work for someone with strong convictions and powerful insights.

Mr. Williams told the graduates that, in our country today, there are more than enough combatants—people dug into their trenches, fighting to the bitter end. He observed that we don't have enough healers. Peacemakers. People of humanity, empathy, and grace. People who are prepared—and willing—to do the hard work, the necessary work, the important work of stitching us back together.

Mr. Williams said that history will judge the people who have peddled and profited from the toxicity and division of our modern times. He told the graduates, "Who they are should not dictate who you become."

Mr. Williams asked the graduates to believe that they could be something very different—a bridge over troubled water. People who lift up our shared humanity. Above narrow self-interest. Above clan and camp.

He concluded, “So that we can see ourselves in each other. And so that we can give grace as freely as we hope to receive it.”

Damian Williams’ hope for those Yale Law graduates is the same hope I have for our graduates—and for all of us. We all have the capacity to be the bridge across the roiling waters that divide us—and that threaten to destroy our communities and our country.

When I was talking to Gail about this speech, I was prompted to reflect on my previous career as a federal prosecutor and a trial lawyer. During that phase of my career, many people predicted that I would be appointed as a United States Attorney or a federal judge. And, at that time, I believed that those positions of power would be the most important and influential work that I could do.

But when I reflected on the speeches and the articles that I’ve shared with you, I came to a realization: Ball State University is where I was meant to be, because serving you is the fulfillment of my life’s most important work.

Working as learning partners with our students, we provide them with pathways to purpose—to a fulfilling career and a meaningful life. Building a bridge to a world that will be more peaceful and more just.

Permit me to share one final story—a story that truly illustrates the life-changing value of our work.

In April, I attended the showcase for “Illuminating Lives,” the latest creation from students participating in our David Letterman Learning Experience.

This year, the students gathered personal stories from Ball State students and graduates. These testimonials were narrated by acting students from our theater department.

One of the testimonials was about a graduate who shared how much her life changed the day she set foot on our campus as a student.

She described how Ball State was “a world away from the impoverished, chaotic life” she knew. She said that her journey as a Cardinal was “made possible by sacrifice and calloused hands” and that she “was meant to move on to bigger things.”

Our University soon became this woman’s sanctuary—her safe place.

She said, “The towering shelves and hushed whispers of Bracken Library were my cathedral ... a bachelor’s, then a master’s, and finally a doctorate felt like feathers added to my wings.”

One evening years later, while reading to her young niece, Lilly, this woman was moved by the realization that her education at our University wasn’t just for her, but it was a ladder for her family to climb.

In the final words she shared for the project, she said:

“Ball State wasn’t just a university. It was a seed planted. A testament to the power of education to lift individuals and entire communities. As I watched Lilly’s

eyes sparkle with curiosity, I knew the seeds of hope, sewn with love and perseverance, would continue to bloom, generation after generation, breaking the cycle of poverty and painting a brighter future, one magic word at a time."

Sometimes I wonder if some people think that I'm too optimistic. But it's easy to be optimistic—to be hopeful—when you have my vantage point.

Every day, I hear impressive stories about our people—some of which I've shared this morning.

On a weekly basis, I attend events that inspire me.

I regularly hear about how our students make a difference in the community.

And I continue to be proud—and grateful—for your many contributions and your sustained commitment to our mission.

So, thank you for affirming my faith in education and my faith in humanity.

And thank you for listening to me this morning.

As I have done every year now for the past seven years, I want to conclude our program with music.

This year, when Bill Jenkins asked what song I had in mind, Gail told him "Bridge Over Troubled Water." It was the title of Mr. Williams' commencement speech.

But then Gail told Bill that I trusted him and his colleagues to know best what song you would need to hear today.

A few weeks later, Bill told Gail that the other song Michael Rafter had chosen for today's medley was written by Jason Robert Brown—a song titled "Hope."

The final verse of the song goes:

"*When life is crazy and impossible to bear—*
*It must be there.*
*Fear never wins.*
*That's what I hope.*
*See? I said "hope."*
*The work begins*."

As we prepare for this new year with hope and gratitude in our hearts, the work indeed begins. It begins anew on Monday. It begins again "one magic word at a time."

Before I introduce our student performers, I want to acknowledge the passing of one of our colleagues.

This Summer, we lost Michael Elliot. Michael was a kind man and a compassionate educator who served as the coordinator for our musical theatre program.

In this role, he touched the lives of so many of our students, including all of the students who are about perform for you.

I am grateful to them for sharing this medley with all of us.

Please welcome to the stage our talented theater students to perform this arrangement by Michael Rafter, with Thomas Hall as pianist.