

President Collins was introduced by Deborah Legg Craddock '80, P '12, Chair, Rhodes College Board of Trustees

### Inauguration Speech

Thank you so much for your very kind introduction, Deborah, and for your incredibly dedicated work as our board chair.

- I want to extend my deepest thanks to all our speakers today – you honor us with your presence and your words, and you enrich our community in so many ways. I am so grateful that you are all part of the Rhodes family.
- Thank you to our delegates and honored guests – it is a privilege to learn from you and work together in this extraordinary mission of higher education we all share.
- I am truly grateful that so many of my predecessors in the presidency are here – President Troutt, President Hass, and President Stevens, you have done so much for Rhodes, and the legacy of your leadership inspires me every day. Thank you for your gracious and generous support as I have transitioned into the role.
- I also very much appreciate the committee responsible for planning this inauguration and our 175th anniversary celebration, and especially Tim Huebner and Anne Beard – they have worked tirelessly to help us celebrate this important milestone in the life of Rhodes College, and we appreciate your hard work, vision, and creativity.
- I also want to thank all the staff who translated that vision into reality – the event planners, the graphic designers, the caterers, the housekeepers, and facilities workers - I know how hard you have worked, and I am so very grateful to you.
- Thank you to our student performers, who will be sharing the gift of music with us throughout the morning.
- And a very special thank you to Kristen Hunt and Angie Brittain in the president's office – without you, none of this, indeed, nothing at all, would be possible.

To the members of our Board of Trustees, past and present – please know how much we appreciate your thoughtful and dedicated stewardship of this great college. Working together with you and seeing your love for the college shine through all the ways you support this institution is one of the real joys of my position.

- To our community representatives – it is a blessing and a privilege to collaborate with you to support this fascinating city we are so fortunate to call home. Thank you for all the ways you serve Memphis.
- To my fellow members of the senior leadership team – thank you for the humility, humor, vision, teamwork, and abiding commitment to Rhodes that you bring to the table every time we are together.
- To our incredible faculty and staff – it is an absolute honor to work in partnership with you. Thank you for all the ways you educate and support our students – you make Rhodes the extraordinary college that it is, and I appreciate you more than words could ever say.

- To our current students and our alumni – thank you for choosing Rhodes. You are the heart and soul of everything we do, and your intelligence, curiosity, and passion inspire us every day.
- And in this year that marks our 175th anniversary, let us honor and acknowledge all our ancestors, all the generations of students, faculty, and staff who have walked these beautiful stone halls in the decades before us. It is the generations of Rhodes alumni, and the community members who fill our halls today, who have created our legacy of leadership, and who truly make Rhodes a place like no other.

On a more personal note, I want to say thank you to my wonderful mother and mother-in-law for being here this morning. I am so grateful for all your support, for so many years.

- I am also humbled to see colleagues from SMU and Wake Forest here – those institutions have been so important to my professional journey and enriched my life in so many different ways. Thank you for being here.
- To my extraordinary husband, Adam – thank you for being such a wonderful partner in our adventure together for the past 31 years. Being here would not be possible without you and all the ways you have supported our crazy and hectic two career family.
- And to my beloved children, Jake, Lily, and Sam – being your mom will always be the greatest honor of my life. I love you all so very much. And thank you to Hunter, Keely, and Natalie for being part of our extended family.

Almost 100 years ago, as you have already heard today, Rhodes President Charles Diehl said the important words that you see highlighted in so many places across our campus: “Realizing the good is ever the enemy of the best, we did not seek merely the good, but the best. There was ever before us the idea of excellence.” I am sure archivist extraordinaire Bill Short could confirm for us that these words have been the basis of many remarks and addresses at Rhodes since President Diehl first uttered them in 1925. I want to go in a more lyrical direction today. In this remarkable and uniquely American city, a city full of music and history and culture and art, a city of soul, it seems only fitting that music serve as our frame today, and as the inspiration for the shared future we are so privileged to be building together. And here, I need to give special thanks to Professor Charles Hughes for helping me work through my musical inspiration.

In 1946, Reverend William Herbert Brewster, a renowned Memphian, minister, educator, composer, and civil rights leader, wrote the beautiful gospel song “Move on Up a Little Higher,” a song that, among other honors, received the Grammy Hall of Fame Award in 1998 and is included in the list of *Songs of the Century* by the Recording Association of America and the National Endowment for the Arts. Rhodes is incredibly honored to be the repository of Reverend Brewster's sermons and some of his printed music and recordings. Reverend Brewster exhorted us in this song to walk and never get tired, to fly and never falter, to move on up a little higher. In talking about the song, Reverend Brewster said it was intended to be “a protest idea and inspiration,” and urged listeners never to “be satisfied with the mediocre.”

These themes of hope, of striving, of grit, of determination, of a commitment to fighting together to make our community a better place no matter what challenges stand in our way, echo throughout Rhodes, throughout Memphis, and throughout Memphis music. Another example is

the terrific Stax hit “I’ll Take You There,” written by the legendary Al Bell and made famous by the Staple Singers. This song is about an imaginary and aspirational place where nobody is crying, nobody is worried, no smiling faces are lying to the races – a world where the civil rights movement and the struggle for social justice have been fully realized.

Indeed, Memphis music has inspired countless singers and songwriters over the decades, including one of my personal favorites, Bruce Springsteen, a great student of Memphis music and a songwriter who cites Elvis Presley as his “genesis moment,” the artist who made him realize that you could “call upon the power of imagination” and “create a transformative self.” My favorite lyrics from Mr. Springsteen come from his song, based in the gospel tradition, about an imaginary train that will take us to a transformative place, a place where dreams will not be thwarted and faith will be rewarded, a place where sunlight streams just as it does in the lyrics of William Brewster and Al Bell and so many Memphis artists. So just for a moment, I hope you will meet me in the land of hope and dreams, because that is how I think about Rhodes – a place full of hope, and a college with extraordinary dreams for its future.

Let us begin with hope, because hope is after all what a liberal arts education represents, and the education that makes Rhodes so very remarkable. In today’s polarized and often ugly world, a world where it sometimes seems that we can’t agree on anything, the liberal arts education provided by our outstanding Rhodes faculty gives us hope. The liberal arts give us the power to imagine a better future, and the tools to work together to make that vision a reality. That is because the liberal arts empower students to analyze difficult material carefully and critically, to communicate effectively both orally and in writing, to listen to one another, to work together civilly and collegially, and to lead passionately both on our campus and in their home communities. Through close collaboration with our wonderful faculty, and deeply meaningful co-curricular experiences shaped by our dedicated staff, Rhodes graduates students who are brimming with confidence, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and compassion. The poet Emily Dickinson famously wrote “I dwell in possibility,” and my favorite part of the Rhodes educational experience is that we graduate students who *can* dwell in possibility, who can sit with the uncomfortable, and who can imagine a kinder, more equitable, and more just future. We graduate students who can lead with hope.

Hope is the story of a member of the class of 1968 who recently told me that as a first generation student she came to Rhodes suffering from a real deficit of self-confidence both academically and socially, but, thanks to our faculty and staff, she graduated as a proud and talented chemistry major who went on to obtain a graduate degree, at a time when there were only seven women in her entire graduate program, and then proceeded to transform the lives of hundreds of students as a teacher herself.

- Hope is our students who work on the Cube satellite, or in the St. Jude Summer Research fellowship; hope is the Rhodes Jazz Band, Singers, and Orchestra and the Mike Curb Institute; hope is the beekeeping and the craft clubs, the swimmers and the softball and soccer teams; hope is the Bonner scholars and Day Scholars and the Kinney program, operating the longest running student-led soup kitchen in the country; hope is the students who participate in Mock Trial or the Institute for Regional Studies or the Turley Memphis Center – our students are extraordinary.

Indeed, our students are precisely the kind of leaders that the world desperately needs to confront the challenges of systemic poverty, homelessness, hunger, racism, and injustice, to give just a few examples, problems we can only solve if we truly come together courageously and collaboratively. Rhodes students and alumni, and the outstanding faculty and staff who educate and mentor them, offer us the hope that we can in fact listen to one another, that we can in fact work together to tackle these grand challenges and create meaningful and positive change. Because of Rhodes, and its core commitment to translating academic study and personal concern into effective leadership and action throughout our world, the cherished members of our Rhodes community indeed help us all move on up a little higher. Because of Rhodes, and the rigorous liberal arts education that we provide, and the enduring commitment to service that we inspire, we dare to dream, we dare to hope, that our graduates can indeed make the world a little better.

As remarkable as Rhodes already is, as much hope as we currently create, we of course also have big dreams, dreams to keep walking forward into the ever brighter future imagined by Dr. Brewster. Rhodes aspires to be one of the finest liberal arts colleges in the country, in terms of the experiences we provide for students both inside and outside the classroom, and the support we provide for our dedicated faculty and staff. How will we get there? And here, I need to give thanks and credit to all the members of our community who worked so hard to create our strategic plan.

- How will we, for example, strengthen our academic and creative excellence? We will of course double down on the things that make us special, but we will also demonstrate a willingness to innovate, and to ensure that our curriculum is equipping students with the skills they need not only to succeed in their individual career journeys in a rapidly changing world, but also to lead their communities forward.
- We will continue to invest in and evolve our outstanding humanities programs, including our signature search and life courses that provide students with a common framework to analyze life's grand challenges, and the ability to engage in truly civil discourse while doing so.
- We will strengthen our wonderful programs in the social sciences and sciences, including finishing the much-needed renovation of our science facilities, and supporting our incredibly popular programs in newer fields like neuroscience, environmental science, and computer science.
- We will reduce barriers to interdisciplinary study and support innovative programs to give students multifocal lenses to view the world, programs like our terrific majors in international studies, urban studies, health equity, and Africana Studies, to give just a few examples.
- We will grow our offerings in business and entrepreneurship, wonderful programs that help distinguish Rhodes among liberal arts colleges and provide students with the tools to grow their local economies and communities.
- And in our city full of soul, this city full of dance and art and theater and music, we will improve our arts facilities and strengthen and grow our offerings in the arts, including, if humanly possible and SACS is willing, bringing some kind of theater major back to the Rhodes community. After all, the arts are what reflect hope and possibility and courage and dreams back to us.

In terms of our dreams for providing the finest college experience outside the classroom, for ensuring a transformational student experience, I have heard the message loud and clear from our students that they would like a student center, and renovations in dorms like Glassell Hall to make terms like the “Glassell Castle” just a tiny bit more accurate. I promise we will continue our efforts to make that happen.

- But we dream of so much more than improved and expanded physical space. We dream of preparing students to succeed wherever their individual futures may take them, and preparing them to lead in their communities with courage and resilience and strength of character and imagination.
- So what are some concrete steps we can take? In a world where students are grappling with the pressures imposed by a carefully curated world of social media that seems to require all perfection, all the time, not to mention all the external pressures in our increasingly uncertain world I mentioned a moment ago – is it any wonder we are seeing rising levels of anxiety and depression among college students?
- Accordingly, we will work to expand our wellness offerings so our students can thrive along every possible dimension of wellness, including emotional, physical, spiritual, and social, in addition to their intellectual journeys.
- We will enhance our terrific career services programming, so more employers across the country and around the globe can meet and hire our incredibly talented Rhodes graduates, and we will ensure our curriculum, both inside and outside the classroom, is equipping students to succeed in a world of work that is constantly evolving.
- We will enhance learning opportunities outside our academic halls, so students will have increasing opportunities to do internships and fellowships, engage in community service, study abroad, have leadership experiences, and collaborate with faculty in their research – those high impact practices that are closely linked to lifelong student success.
- We will deepen our relationship with the wonderful city of Memphis through an expanded institute for community engagement, and we will reaffirm the abiding commitment to community service that infuses every corner of this beautiful campus, so we are serving this great city in the ways that most benefit the amazing people who live here.
- And we will continue to improve our sports facilities and cheer on our Lynx student-athletes so we enhance our tradition of excellence not only in the classroom but on the court, in the pool, and on the field.

We will achieve our dreams, and secure our future, by doing everything we can to strengthen our national and international outreach and presence, so students and families around the world will have the chance to learn about and experience this place like no other.

- We will launch a capital campaign to help us enhance our financial aid and increase our support for faculty and staff so we can continue to bring the very best students, teachers, and mentors to Rhodes without limitations imposed by financial constraints.
- We will offer new professional development and leadership training opportunities for faculty and staff to ensure our workspaces are full of joy and connection and opportunities for personal and professional growth; we will strive to foster a culture of transparency, collaboration, and shared governance; and we will increase support for the

impactful research and creative activity our faculty generate every day to bring a little more sunlight, and a little more hope, into their academic fields, and into our world.

Finally, we will foster a culture of belonging by centering diversity, inclusion, equity, access, and belonging at the heart of everything we do, so that every student and every employee at Rhodes feels fully empowered to bring their whole selves to this wonderful college.

- I am very proud that of the five senior hires I have made since coming to Rhodes, four are women and three are people of color, I am very proud that we have increased our score on the Campus Pride Index from a 3 out of 5 to a 4.5 out of 5 in the past year, I am very proud that we have started a vibrant new program to support our first generation students, and I am very proud that our new class of first year students is the most diverse class in Rhodes' history.
- Those accomplishments are due to the hard work and determination of so many people in this room, but we are not close to finished yet, and we will not waiver in this fundamental and enduring commitment to our community to ensure that every Lynx truly matters and that every Lynx is truly valued.

Our dreams are audacious, and they are ambitious. But working together, and with your support, I have every confidence that we will fly and never falter, that we will arrive at a future where our hopes and dreams cannot be thwarted, and our abiding faith in this wonderful place like no other continues to be rewarded. Thank you for the opportunity to work together with you as your president – it is truly the honor and privilege of a lifetime. And thanks to all of you for being part of the extraordinary Rhodes community.