

## **A Place of Transformation**

### **Remarks at Founders Day 2002 President Myles Brand Indiana University Bloomington, Indiana**

Founders Day gives us an opportunity to think about the early citizens of our state who envisioned this great public university, and to take stock of what we have built on the strong foundation they laid for us. It is worth noting that until 1949, the occasion we celebrate was, in fact, called Foundation Day.

In 1820, on a sunny day in June, a group of Hoosier pioneers met beneath the spreading branches of giant elm in the frontier village of Corydon, Indiana. As they set about the task of writing the state's constitution, they established a mandate for higher education.

At that time, Bloomington had been in existence for only two years. It was a city on the edge of the frontier, scarcely more than a tiny way station amid the lush forests of southern Indiana. The Missouri Compromise had just set the balance between slave and free states. Beethoven had just written his Ninth Symphony. And settlers were rushing across the Ohio River in search of their piece of the American Dream.

Conditions were so primitive that it took four years to select the site, build the buildings, and hire a teacher who was qualified in the instruction of theology, Greek, and Latin. Those were the only subjects offered in the early years of what was then called the Indiana Seminary.

Our state's founders recognized that higher education is essential to the preservation of a free government, and they made provision for it in the constitution. Thus they realized a great truth: that the first duty of each generation is to prepare the next to meet the demands of the present and the future.

In the spring of 1824, Indiana Seminary opened its doors to its first 12 students. IU Trustee David Banta described that historic moment. "On this May morning," he wrote, "a fire was kindled on the altar of learning that has never been extinguished." And now we daily warm ourselves by that fire, which grows ever brighter because of the contributions of those faculty and students we honor today. All of us—family and friends, faculty and students, staff and administrators—offer you our unqualified admiration. You have proven yourselves worthy to follow the pattern established nearly two centuries ago by the visionary founders of Indiana University.

Sometimes we go to a place, and we immediately know that just being there will change who we are and how we see the world. Indiana University is such a place—always has been and always will be. Everyone who is part of it has a story of transformation to tell.

Let me share with you one of those stories from the early days of the university. John C. Robinson, who would later become a teacher, an attorney, and a judge, describes traveling to IU for the first time. The year was 1856. “I had left my plow in its furrow the noon before,” writes Robinson. “Once before that day I had been on railroad cars and made a trip of some forty miles from home. I was clad in hand-me-downs and had experienced a prodigious rapidity of growth with which [my clothes] did not sympathize. I had never seen a building that would bear comparison with the frontispiece of the [course] catalogue of 1856-57. My conceptions of college life and of college students were entirely in harmony with that picture.”

The building that so impressed John Robinson was the First University Building at the old Seminary Square site. It has long since been torn down, but the classical porticos that graced its entryways are now part of the Well House. The Well House stands at the center of the Bloomington campus, just as the experiences that made young Robinson come to see the world differently are still at the center of the university’s work.

It was in the building pictured on the catalog that John Robinson experienced a transformation familiar to many in this audience. He gained new citizenship in the world of ideas. He earned his passport by sitting at the feet of such men as Daniel Kirkwood. Professor Kirkwood did such original work in the field of astronomy that David Starr Jordan, future president of IU and later of Stanford, called him the “Kepler of America.”

Robinson writes that he and his classmates took “pride in Dr. Kirkwood’s reputation and felt a glow of satisfaction that one so eminent should be their teacher.” Yet the image Robinson and his fellows treasured in their hearts and minds was of the man himself, whose delight in the thrill of discovery, in finding a new way to approach an old problem moved his students to ever greater heights of accomplishment. “It needed only one such man within the walls of a college to make it a great one” writes Robinson. At that point, the Indiana Seminary had three. Today IU has many, many more professors of that caliber.

Those faculty members on whom we confer distinguished rank today offer a case in point. Each of them has virtually created the fields in which they work. Distinguished Professor Paul Newman is the founder of comparative linguistics in an African language spoken by more than 35 million people. Rudy Raff pioneered the field of evolutionary developmental biology. Historian James Riley is the creator and leading scholar of the demographics of health and mortality. Psychologist Rich Shiffrin is renowned for having defined the concepts of short- and long-term memory and for a career of pathbreaking work in human cognition.

On a day like today, we pause to contemplate the fact that ours is an ancient enterprise. The idea of the university has been tested and refined since the time of Plato, who first

invented the concept of the academy. Over the last two centuries, IU has elaborated on and renewed that model to meet the demands of the time. The British biologist Thomas Huxley put it this way. He said, “the medieval university looked backward; it professed to be a storehouse of old knowledge. The modern university looks forward, and is a factory of new knowledge.”

Today we celebrate the achievements of our students and faculty. Even as we do so, we recognize that accomplishment is a journey, not a destination. That is true for us as individuals. And it is true for the university as a whole. Looking out over this audience, I am pleased to have such talented and dedicated fellow travelers. Again, our warmest congratulations to each of you.

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