

STETSON UNIVERSITY

Comments by President Christopher F. Roellke, PhD Convocation, Aug. 12, 2020

Pope Duncan, was Stetson's seventh president and served from 1977-1987. He also was a faculty member in religious studies who wrote *Memoirs of a Peripatetic Educator* when he retired as president.

From Duncan: "I have frequently made the statement that any president is going to have one or more crises each year that will absorb her or his time for days and even weeks. It may not be a crisis that shakes the very foundation of the institution, but it is one, for the president, that becomes a major time consumer and wrings out energy. If you do not have that crisis in the fall, you had better be prepared, for it is going to come before the academic year is out."

Duncan was referring to the year 1981-82 and I thought you might be interested to learn what those crises were:

- 1.) The first was ongoing philosophical and financial disputes between the Florida Baptist Convention and Stetson University.
- 2.) The second involved allegations that the director of Facilities Operations was taking kickbacks from contractors working on campus building projects.

I am so very happy to tell you that neither of these crises is an issue for Stetson University as we enter the 2020-21 academic year.

However, throughout all of my many conversations with faculty, staff, students, community partners, alumni and the Board of Trustees, I have described our current context as presenting a "once-in-a-century" set of challenges and opportunities. In meeting these challenges and taking advantage of the opportunities that lie in front of us, I would again like to draw from the words and wisdom of childhood educator and television personality Fred Rogers who has famously declared three ways to ultimate success.

The first way is to be kind.

The second way is to be kind.

The third way (to ultimate success) is to be kind.

I spoke the following words on Nov. 21, 2019, during my initial introduction to the Stetson University community as your 10th president.

"Kindness not only matters, it enables us to listen, to engage with others unlike ourselves, and to consider paths we can forge together to make our community, in fact the world, a better place."

On that very day back in November, the U.S. House of Representatives was conducting impeachment hearings. As a country, we were continuing to struggle to have socio-political discourse that would move us forward. On that date back in November, we were challenged to find common ground on issues of identity, of inclusion and even on scientific evidence related to climate change.

For those doing the math, that was 265 days ago, and since that time, much has happened globally, nationally, in Florida and in our communities. The aforementioned socio-political division is the deepest I have experienced in my lifetime. Several incidents of racial injustice have stimulated critical and ongoing debates about policing, about equality and about the American dream. The coronavirus has produced a global pandemic, the likes of which the world has not experienced since 1918, and just last week, Canada's last intact Arctic shelf collapsed, with a chunk of ice larger than the size of Manhattan plunging into the ocean.

My intent today is *not* to paint a picture of doom and gloom. Rather, it is to assert that these global challenges require us to study, to analyze, to debate, to question, to engage and to *learn*. I want to further assert that there is no better place to do these things than in DeLand and in Gulfport. There is no better place to analyze, to debate, to question and to engage than at Stetson University.

Why? Because Stetson University is a place where values and learning meet. Stetson University is a place where our students, our staff, our faculty, our community *do not shy away from challenges*. We meet them head on and we meet these challenges this year with three guiding themes: kindness, empathy and agency.

Kindness: the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate, and -- if you agree with me and with Fred Rogers -- is the key to ultimate success.

Empathy: the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Agency: the degree to which an individual has the ability to make decisions about her or his life.

Agency in the context of work: the degree to which individuals have the ability to craft their work norms and work environment to achieve an intended goal.

Throughout my much accelerated listening and learning tour, which has included virtual and in-person gatherings with student leadership, staff advisory councils, local government officials, members of the Board of Trustees and our alumni at both the College of Law and the DeLand campus, I have been emphasizing these three themes: kindness, empathy, agency. Our current context demands that each and every one of us demonstrate kindness. We must be able to empathize with each and every member of our community who may be encountering challenges unlike our own, and we must have agency in order to engage in self-care, to use good judgement and to do whatever we can to promote our own health and safety, and the health and safety of others.

I am absolutely convinced that the schools, human service organizations, small and large businesses, and institutions of higher education that practice kindness, empathy and agency will be the ones that emerge from this "once-in-a-century set of challenges" stronger and more resilient than they were before.

My confidence in Stetson has been reaffirmed by what I have learned in my much-accelerated listening and learning tour. I have learned that Stetson is not only kind, it is a resourceful, creative and hard-working community. In fact, I have been known to affectionately describe Stetson as both "scrappy" and "tenacious."

Throughout my experience as a collegiate athlete, I was always most fond of my teammates that were described as scrappy—often the hardest working ballplayers who hustled on every play, would dive for loose balls, and would always get the most out of their abilities. They also made all of their teammates better—never worrying about who got the credit for the team's success—it was all about the team.

I also loved my most tenacious teammates—those that never gave up, often immersing themselves in the toughest defensive assignments, going up against the bigger stronger opponent, doing a lot of the dirty work that was necessary to lead the team to victory. For those who are scrappy and tenacious, it really is all about the team.

It is with all humility and the sincerest of self-reflection, that I and the teammates I have had over the years, consider your president, Chris Roellke, #10, to be both scrappy and tenacious. And in my early days at Stetson, I have listened and learned that our beloved Hatter community absolutely shares these characteristics and *I love that*. Not only do I love that, but we also need these characteristics in these challenging times. When something is not right, Hatters fix it. When we stray from our stated mission and goals, we remedy that with all deliberate speed. When we observe or experience racial injustice, we work to eradicate it. When our community hurts, we figure out ways—together—to heal. When confronted with a global pandemic, we innovate, we clean, we install ventilation, we are respectful of the most vulnerable, we wear masks, we physically distance ourselves, we wash our hands--for at least 20 seconds, multiple times a day, we limit our group size, we move to single-occupancy residential rooms, we innovate and modify our curriculum in short order to meet the contemporary demands of our society and our community, we look out for and care for each other. We practice kindness, we practice empathy and we practice agency.

Why? Because Education is Absolutely Essential and We Are Stetson University.

I would like to conclude with some modest, but I think important, advice for our Stetson students:

- Figure out a way to do laundry efficiently and regularly, especially this year as you will want your face masks to be clean and fresh.
- Find out where you work best – library, tents outside, dorm room, the CUB -- stick with what works and stick with what can be done in a physically distant manner. This won't be easy, but it is important.
- Meet and interact with people unlike yourself. Your opinions and your opportunities will be broadened.
- Be sensible and be safe, and take it upon yourself to make sure your classmates do the same.

Again: Kindness not only matters, it enables us to listen, to engage with others unlike ourselves, and to consider paths we can forge together to make our community, in fact the world, a better place.

Stay safe, stay well and stay engaged.

GO HATTERS!