

Thank you Judge Gerrard, President Emeritus Ohles and Reverend Doctor Forrester.

I, also, want to sincerely thank Bette Olson and the rest of the Inauguration Committee for the countless hours and creativity they put into this week's events.

The weather has forced our staff in the physical plant and food service to work extra hard to make necessary adjustments, so be sure to share your gratitude with them — and have patience.

Thank you to each of our speakers and performers — both here this morning and this afternoon.

Welcome and thank you to the representatives from the city of Lincoln and the state as well as the delegates here representing scores of colleges and universities.

My most sincere welcome and appreciation to those representing the Nebraska Wesleyan Community:
Our Board of Governors, the President's Board of Advisors, and alumni. To our faculty, staff and administrators, and most importantly, our students.

I can't name you all, but I am so pleased that you all are with me on this very important day in my life and in the life of Nebraska Wesleyan.

And finally, I could not have succeeded without the sacrifices and endless support of my daughter, Samantha, and my wife, Diana who is not only the love of my life, but my best friend. Thank you so much.

So, welcome everyone! And thank you for sharing in this University celebration.

When struggling with what to say in an inauguration address, I did what I believe our first president of Nebraska Wesleyan, Charles Creighton, most certainly did in 1888. He considered the audience, he looked into his heart for inspiration, and then he would have Googled, "great inauguration speeches." So, from this address, I hope you leave knowing more about me as a person, more about me as a leader and what my vision is for Nebraska Wesleyan University.

Let me begin by saying, I am humbled, honored and most of all excited to serve as the 17th President of Nebraska Wesleyan University.

Statistically speaking, I am not supposed to be standing here. Of my four grandparents, only one graduated from high school. The other three had an eighth grade education or less. Therefore, education has truly been a transformative means to changing our family trajectory. So you see, the odds were not in my favor to have such a rich and joyful career as a professor — one in which I could pay it forward to hundreds of students of my own. But, I was also given many opportunities to serve as a leader at four exceptional liberal arts colleges, each with its own unique community.

Even though I grew up relatively poor, I recognize that I had many advantages and unearned privileges that others did not. I had a stable home with a nurturing and supportive family. The importance of education was always a value that was underscored.

We lived in a rural town with a community that fostered those small-town values, such as helping your neighbors, personal integrity and work ethic. I have since come to learn that these are not values that are only held by small towns, but are seen in any place where there are people who care about others in that community, who look out for the less fortunate, and strive for a better life for themselves and their family, but not at the expense of others.

What excites me the most about serving at Nebraska Wesleyan is that I am a part of a rich fabric of community that extends back over 130 years and one that is woven into this amazing community of Lincoln, of Nebraska, and of the world.

My inaugural message today is on community and momentum, particularly the special joy of being a part of a welcoming community and the powerful benefit we have from the collective wisdom in the Nebraska Wesleyan community. Wisdom to help us plot our course into the future.

I am embarrassed and humbled by the kind words shared by Craig Bowron, Chris Whitt, and Sharon Herzberger. These are three dear friends who have each modeled for me how to be a better human being within a community. Each has taught me lessons on how to be an authentic person

and inclusive leader. Each of these three knew me at different points in my life and within the context of a particular community, time and place. From each, I learned and grew as a person.

From Craig Bowron, I have learned so very much over the past 36 years. But, that first important lesson was to accept who I am and embrace it. We were first-year students living on the same floor, both from working class families. I met many students in that community who were much wealthier and more worldly than I was. I felt a need to fit in – to conform – to keep up. Craig, however, modeled a self-assuredness that gave me the confidence to embrace who I was and take pride in my rural roots. He has continued to be a steadfast friend and a frank sounding board.

Chris Whitt joined the Augustana College faculty a few years after me. It was very much my community – my alma mater where I met and married my wife, and where I was off to a successful beginning as a faculty member. Chris, with his joyful, passionate style rocked my sense of how my beloved community was perceived by others who didn't fit the majority demographic. Without judgment or embarrassment, he deepened my understanding of societal disparities, privilege, and unconscious bias not only in society but in our deeply rooted systems at colleges and universities. Chris helped me understand how I could be a more informed champion for diversifying colleges and be a catalyst for creating a community that is welcoming for all.

Finally, Sharon Herzberger was not only the president to whom I reported as the Vice President of Academic Affairs. She was an outstanding mentor and patient teacher as I joined a community and culture unlike any I had been a part of before. Whittier College, with 70 percent students of color and no racial majority, is also a Quaker college. You see, they do not vote at their meetings, but rather all decisions are decided by reaching consensus of all community members. Sharon reinforced my commitment to a healthy shared governance through careful listening and consensus-building. She reminded us all to not silence or ignore the dissenters, but rather keep an open mind especially to those who disagree with you. She also demonstrated the positive impact of creating and sustaining a great leadership team through mutual trust and support.

These three – and many others in my life – have instilled in me that each of us is an integral part of the community. Whether that of a small town in

western Illinois or on a small college campus in the city of Lincoln, there are common threads of humanity that connect us all into a community.

I am so very happy to have been warmly welcomed as the president of this community, the Nebraska Wesleyan community.

As president I accept many responsibilities that are essential to this role. I, of course, must be mindful to budgets (our revenues and costs). I must worry about risks that threaten the vitality of the institution, I will fret over how to improve the salaries of our hard-working faculty and staff and simultaneously reduce the financial burden of our students. I will worry about creating a welcoming and safe campus that supports all students, especially those who are often disenfranchised, such as those under-represented, those with differing abilities or with mental health struggles. These issues are essential responsibilities of me as your president.

However, there must be more that you expect of me. There must be more that I expect of myself as I serve this community.

As George Bernard Shaw once said, "I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I live."

That quote truly speaks to my core as I aspire to be a servant leader. I want my legacy to be one of a community-builder – a president who listens intensely, cares deeply about each person, welcomes all people to this community, and inspires you to excellence. I hope to model a community spirit that motivates each of us to be our best selves by giving selflessly of our time and talent to lift up others in our community not only our campus community, but those in the neighborhoods near campus and throughout the city of Lincoln, in greater Nebraska, the nation and the world. We must see ourselves as integral parts of our local community as well as global citizens.

Nebraska Wesleyan is a community that is thriving. We are at an amazing and pivotal moment in the history of this school. We have many recent successes to celebrate including the amazing, new Acklie Hall of Science and a very successful Bold Designs campaign; we have had record-setting incoming classes and achieved outstanding graduation rates; and our students' and alumni successes are phenomenal.

In higher education we often talk about the “value proposition.” That is to say, “Is the education you receive at Nebraska Wesleyan worth the investment of your time and money?”

I have no doubt that alumni, current students, and high school students and their families can see the incredible return on their investment in a Nebraska Wesleyan education.

So, what is next?

How will we as a mission-driven institution take advantage of this strong position in order to move boldly into the next chapter of this great story of Nebraska Wesleyan?

That is quite literally up to you.

We are initiating a strategic planning process that will intentionally and authentically gather input from our students, faculty, and staff, as well as reach out to our alumni, Board of Governors, and community members to help imagine together what Nebraska Wesleyan should prioritize in the upcoming years.

What are going to be the new academic programs, community and corporate initiatives, and building projects we will tackle together? Those answers will define not only the next five years, but will determine our trajectory for decades beyond.

I believe in the collective wisdom of the Nebraska Wesleyan community to help create the path forward. This community, comprised of the people who love Nebraska Wesleyan and deeply believe in the important mission it serves, understands who we are and how we will keep the momentum. The choices we collectively make must emphasize the continuity of what we do so well: transforming students and preparing them to make a difference in the diverse, complex and rapidly changing world.

We are, therefore, in an ideal position to create the next strategic plan. This community is replete with people who are bright and compassionate, who are creative and courageous, who are entrepreneurial and bold.

This is not a time to relax and rest on our recent successes, but rather a time to take advantage of our position of strength and keep the momentum!

As author Margaret Wheatley once said, "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

Thank you for coming today and thank you in advance for being a part of this incredible community as together we create the vision and path we will forge into that next great chapter in Nebraska Wesleyan University's history!