

FIFTY YEARS HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE – LET'S KEEP BUILDING
VICTOR HURST CONVOCATION
CLEMSON UNIVERSITY
AUGUST 21, 2012

9:00 A.M.

I dare say that this audience would not have looked like this 50 years ago, when I stepped from a black Buick sedan, waded through a crowd of media people, ascended the steps of Tillman Hall and registered for classes. I knew before I registered that there was something special and different about this place - and that going to school here would be a positive life-changing experience.

In the months leading up to my arrival I had read daily, the Tiger, and came to the conclusion that my arrival as the first black student to attend an all-white school in S.C., would be, of course, historic but relatively peaceful and uneventful – especially when compared to the social unrest that other black students had met in neighboring Southern states.

I had gained great insight from the articles, editorials, and letters to the editor from students, faculty, and university leaders. There was rigorous public discussion and debate covering a range of topics. There was debate over whether I had a right to attend Clemson. There was debate over whether my entrance would impact Clemson's great tradition. And there was debate over how South Carolina, and indeed the South, would accommodate to the demise of segregation.

But the prevailing opinion of student leaders and the President of Clemson, Dr. R.C. Edwards – was that if nothing else – the proud tradition of Clemson would be maintained, the laws would be obeyed, and I would be treated like any other student.

So – I sensed on that cold day in January that I was coming into an environment where I might indeed have a chance to succeed as a student, and to get an education that would allow me the opportunity to go out and

fulfill my hopes and aspirations of becoming a good architect – building not only buildings, but perhaps working with others to build better communities. I believe to this very day, that I got that great education on this campus. I gained much as a student from some pretty sharp teachers, design critics, and talented visiting lecturers who came to the campus.

But my greatest education really came from the many relationships developed between me and other students on the campus.

Back then, some politicians, and ardent segregationists, who opposed my entry – hoped that if students would ignore my presence and isolate me socially, that I might soon be discouraged – and decide to leave.

Of course, that did not happen. I had the opportunity to meet and make many friends who I continue to know even to this day. And back then, we talked about not only the current social events going on on the campus – but we also talked hours on end about the most salient issue of the day, Civil Rights, and the wide spread social change then sweeping the South.

How would Clemson change with my entry? How would South Carolina change? What would the leading politicians at the state and national levels do to impact positive outcomes for white and black South Carolinians?

What I found most hopeful in my years here as a student, was that a good many of us 18 to 22 year olds – had a positive belief that our state, and indeed our nation, would undergo some struggle – but better days were ahead for them and me and others who looked like me. And a lot of us left Clemson with the belief that we could make a difference.

I graduated from Clemson in 1965, confident that I could be successful in my new career, in a new city. In October of this year, the firm I started in Charlotte with Jeff Huberman in 1971 will be 41 years old.

We started the firm, and intentionally focused on finding creative designers who were diverse in race, gender, geography, and experience, and willing to

blend their diversity into a collegial spirit of collaboration across professional disciplines to solve problems for our varied clientele.

Indeed our diversity – i.e. our willingness to engage all parties and all viewpoints, allowed us to accommodate to, and to promote change and innovation, not just in our buildings, but also through positive social uplift in the lives of the people who used those buildings. We were about the challenge of making a difference.

Our experiences as architects carried over for some of our team into the political area. I was fortunate to serve for a time in elective office and saw first hand the importance of solving problems and building a stronger community – by engaging as much diversity as possible – then blending neighborhood leaders, with business leaders, academics with politicians, Democrats with Republicans, and conservatives with liberals, to find that elusive common ground needed to bring progress. It's the story of my life – indeed it's my DNA – and what has defined me.

Our city has changed dramatically over the years. And I think most would say that Charlotte is one of those new American cities on the cutting edge of change. We are learning how to become a stronger city by engaging our diverse population of citizens. We have become experts at collaborative public/private ventures and initiatives, building facilities and infrastructure, but also making substantial improvements in social services and public education. We are continually learning lessons about building trust and engaging as many citizens as possible in the messy pursuit of democratic government.

I'd like to believe that the Democratic Party's choice of Charlotte for its National Convention has much to do with the city's strong embrace of progressive change and innovative policies. I am delighted that in just fourteen days – our city, our region, will be in the spotlight for the world to see. And I believe, that, on balance, they will see and witness a community at work on building for tomorrow.

So as I look back to 50 years ago, our generation did make a difference. The changes are most noticeable and notable. The changes have been transformative, uplifting, pervasive, and for the most part, they have raised the quality of life. Fifty years ago, we had no cell phones, no internet, no social media, nor any of the high tech advances that have dramatically changed how we communicate. Fifty years ago, we could not have envisioned the social and political prominence of women and minorities in this state or nation. Fifty years ago, we could not imagine the tremendous growth on this campus in research or academic programs. And fifty years ago, we could not foresee the depth of the diversity in all aspects of life at Clemson, and I am pleased to see you continue to reach for even more changes.

I know that many of my classmates from the Class of '65 had a lot to do with the changes we have witnessed. A lot of them, through personal and public initiatives, large and small, changed minds, changed attitudes, and influenced behavior. That's what an educated corps of good students do . . . they change minds, they change attitudes, and they influence behavior. I have seen my classmates work in the political, social and philanthropic communities, across the Carolinas. And I'm proud of their collective impact and to be able to say that today . . . fifty years after my entrance. We really have made a difference!

So as you sit here today listening to me . . . what do you see as your challenge? I ask this faculty and students here today . . . what is your equivalent of the Civil Rights issue of my student years? This new year will bring new goals, new priorities, and new obstacles. I can see . . . with the perspective of fifty years – that you are blessed, as faculty and as students, by the privilege you have in working in an environment like this University. The work and education you gain here can and will move the quality of life upward for many people in this region.

You, as a faculty, have so much more in the way of resources to draw upon – and you are working with students who are perhaps much smarter as freshmen, than we were as seniors! I would hope that you will take

advantage of that, and push your students to do well, and reach for excellence in their coursework – making both family and community stronger and proud.

But I would also hope that you will encourage your students to reach beyond their studies and their personal goals to make Clemson an even stronger community of citizens. I would hope you would encourage them to reach beyond their comfort zones, and intentionally embrace folk from different backgrounds and places.

I would hope you will not let your students treat this “seminary of learning” like an ivory tower, but rather encourage them to pay close attention to what is going on in the urban areas of Charleston, Greenville, and Columbia, as well as the many rural places in this state that is the home of so much poverty.

And then I hope you will ask your students to pay attention over the next two months to the very important presidential election campaign – which will substantially impact us for generations to come. Encourage them to engage in debate, volunteer, and listen carefully – but most of all to get involved!

Finally, I would hope you would encourage your students to leave Clemson one day. As wonderful as Clemson is, they must commit to leaving – and leaving to make a difference in society. The highest calling of a faculty is to teach, and to influence the collective minds and behavior of the young people who will be our leaders of tomorrow. Have a great year and may God continue to bless you and this great institution.

