

*Bill Dickinson Remarks
Smith Renaissance Society Chancellor's Reception
May 1, 2010*

I invite you to think with me for a few minutes about our purpose.

The anthropologist Margaret Mead tells us that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. As a guy who grew up away from my family, in the bewildering exile of foster care, I can say that in 1965 the visionaries who founded this campus changed *my* world, granting me entrance into a community that celebrated me as its reason for being rather than treating me as a placement problem. In gratitude, in 1999 I rallied a cohort of Pioneer classmates and friends inside and outside the University to try to change the world for some of today's young people, creating what has become the Smith Renaissance Society. In 2010, we have forged a lovely, durable public-private partnership that gets good results using imagination, a little money, and a lot of soul power.

Chancellor Dean McHenry, the first inhabitant of this house, was a California farm kid at a time when the roads into Yosemite were not yet paved. His father had a fourth grade education. He believed, with the clear vision of one who had experienced it, and the unyielding commitment of one who meant it, that helping promising people from all backgrounds climb life's ladder is at the heart of the University of California's mission.

UC president Clark Kerr, who presided over the birth of this campus, was Dean's graduate school roommate at Stanford. He was a bureaucrat's bureaucrat in the best sense: he knew how to take fresh ideas and put them into play in a complex system like the University of California. As a Quaker Kerr believed that each of us has a divine spark within and that it is our proper business on this planet to respond to that spark in others.

Putting their ideals and imaginations to work, they set out to create a campus made up of small communities, each with its own special identity, that would be good places in which to enable that creative spark to flourish in young people.

Page Smith, whose name we bear and whose necktie I am honored to be wearing today, was the founding provost of Cowell College, my college, the first of those communities. A classy guy, extraordinary role model, and splendid mentor, Page was prone to lofty ideals, such as his declaration that Cowell was to be dedicated to "the pursuit of truth in the company of friends." He believed that one of the purposes of undergraduate education is to love the students.

In my case that meant having an older man I trusted to whom I could turn when I needed help thinking through things that were beyond me. It meant having someone know me well enough to invite me to go on a spiritual retreat with him. It meant having the use of the provost's house when the dorms were closed one Thanksgiving. It meant having someone open doors for me, introduce me to people who would become important influences in my life. Very often, it simply meant having someone who my classmates

and I took seriously take us seriously, sitting down to break bread with us. What Amy Hamel's husband Gildas calls moments of grace.

It seems fitting and natural to do things like that for -- and with -- some of today's students who are on their own. I am grateful to so many others, including most of you, who have joined me in that noble effort, caring, competent, committed people who share freely because it is the right thing to do. You give money, which is good. You show up as mentors, which is good. Sometimes you help us navigate the complexities of today's University, which is good. But at the end of the day, we are much more than that. We are all part of a caring community—our strength rests in that.

The name of the game is fellowship.

It would be impossible to acknowledge each of you today, but I would like to mention one person who is not here, community studies Professor Paul Ortiz, who now teaches in Florida. For several years Paul, whose specialty was the Civil Rights movement, was our faculty advisor. It was Paul who taught us a slogan we adopted from the Civil Rights movement, "lifting as we climb."

This brings me to the Collegiate Fellows, our reason for being. I love it when you are willing to trust that I, or someone else in our little community, will take *you* seriously and respond to the creative spark within each of *you*. I love it that you stay in school and graduate at a much better rate than your peers. But I particularly love the generous enthusiasm with which you show up for younger kids, responding to *their* sparks and lending *them* a helping hand up the ladder. Over the years you have touched the lives of hundreds of foster kids for whom college was, at best, a vague abstraction.

I am proud of all of you, but I am particularly proud of those who do that and then set out to be world-changing citizens after graduation:

Deutron Kebebew set aside a career in electrical engineering to work with foster kids in Santa Cruz and now directs a long-term study of the effects of missing fathers.

Matilda Stubbs is working on a PhD in cultural anthropology at Northwestern University with the long-term goal of improving the foster care system.

Gladys Macario is working on an MSW at Virginia Commonwealth University, and plans to return to California to work with homeless and runaway youths.

Llyw Dorrell, a popular teacher in a Santa Clara school where sixty percent of the students are free lunch kids, has made it her mission to believe in those on whom everyone else is ready to give up.

Shaeleya Miller is working on a PhD in sociology at UC, Santa Barbara, trying to figure out how to make things better for gay foster kids, who often have it doubly hard when they are put on their own on their eighteenth birthday.

James Barton is at Hastings law school, preparing for a career as a legal advocate for foster kids. I can see James one day sitting on the dependency bench.

Having started F.Y.I., a nifty program for Santa Cruz middle school foster kids, Colette Hottinger and Sierra Reid-Hoffman head off in the fall to UC, Berkeley and San Diego State to pursue MSWs and will surely continue to be committed change agents.

Some see the Smith Renaissance Society as about giving back. That's not how I see it. Dean McHenry, Clark Kerr, and Page Smith embodied values that were easy for a young person to grasp. They are gone now. The way I see it, it is up to those of us who remain and remember to carry on. From where I stand what we are doing is walking in their footsteps, changing the world, and pursuing truth in the company of friends.

Thank you for helping make it so.