

*Bill Dickinson Remarks
University House Legacy Luncheon
November 29, 2011*

I have been asked to talk about why I decided to leave the lion's share of my estate to UCSC. It's simple: having founded what has become the Smith Renaissance Society, I want to try to secure its future. More interesting, I think, is what led me to start it, how it has evolved, and how it eventually led me to a larger mission.

There are many stories to be told. Mine is that I grew up in the bewildering exile of foster care, often treated more as a placement problem than a fairly intelligent, sensitive kid, a dreamer who had been taken from the family I loved, forced to make sense of a world in which I was faced with an endless cast of strangers who didn't seem to know what to make of me. When I was eleven my then-current social worker summed me up pretty accurately: "William is incorrigible."

Whatever else she meant, it may have been her way of saying that I didn't take well to being caught in a complicated system that wasn't designed to take me all that seriously. Without being able as a child to put it into words, I yearned to be with people who would care about me, appreciate my intelligence, be patient with my shortcomings, and see in me not a placement problem but the promise of something good that was unlikely to be realized without meaningful help.

I never found that growing up.

I *did* find it -- in abundance -- for the first time when this campus opened in 1965. When we arrived my classmates and I were greeted by a community of amazing idealists – faculty, administrators, and staff alike – dreamers who behaved as if they had been waiting for us, were pleased greatly that we had arrived, and regarded us as their primary reason for being here. And I never saw them waver in that.

As a result of the experience of my time here, I was set up for a reasonably comfortable adult life, an interesting, varied, fairly successful career, and a strong commitment to being a responsible citizen. More importantly, I think, I was taught to forge a moral compass that has kept me from getting lost in the wilderness of modern life.

How could I not be grateful?

In 1999, in the run up to our Pioneer Class reunion, I decided to create a scholarship for UCSC students who were veterans of foster care or delinquency, and orphans without adequate family support. I wanted to create a worthy living memorial to Page and Eloise Smith, Cowell College's incredibly fine founding provost and his spunky artist wife, the unforgettable, immensely respectable father and mother of my college, you might say.

When she heard what I intended to do, a fellow Pioneer, Judy Einzig, insisted that it was not enough to give money, I had to show up and be Page Smith. Right, I thought: if you know what it is like to be treated with respect and concern you can do that for others.

And that's how it started. A man who cried readily, Page Smith was an uncompromising advocate, in a heady but sometimes-heartless academic thicket, for the radical idea that one of the most important purposes of undergraduate education is to love the students.

He writes: "Love is, of course, what holds the world together. It is the mortar of our perilously fragile lives. It cannot be bidden, bought, sold, earned; it is indistinguishable from grace. None of us are worthy of it, and yet all of us must have it to live. It can't be taught....Love has to be demonstrated or experienced. Teachers who love their students are of course by that very fact teaching their students the nature of love."

Like Page, I was able to mobilize an exceptional group of caring, competent, committed adults --from inside and outside the University -- to provide a group of today's students with the heart of what my classmates and I had. Starting with three students, we have grown to sixty-nine. Along the way we added students who have been homeless for serious stretches, those whose parents are in prison, and those whose families reject them when they learn that they are gay.

To date we have served over two hundred. And they, in turn, often make great use of that service after they graduate:

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.

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.

Having lived on the streets as a kid before Santa Cruz had homeless shelters, Scott Page is doing leading-edge research on the human ear at MIT where he already would have left with his PhD if he weren't committed to his research team.

Llyw Dorrell, a popular teacher in a Santa Clara middle school where sixty percent of the students are free- or reduced-lunch kids, has made it her mission to believe in those on whom everyone else is ready to give up because, she says, that could have been her when she was their age.

As the years moved along, something interesting happened. I got lost in reading the oral histories of UCSC's founders the way others read sacred texts. I talked about what they had in mind with those from the early years with whom I have remained close. I read Clark Kerr's memoir and Page Smith's *Killing the Spirit*. As I did, I found myself drawn

from remembrance to reverence. Those men created something wonderful. I decided to do my bit to try to make sure that it doesn't get lost.

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 and later at Berkeley during the worst years of the Great Depression. He became a bureaucrat's bureaucrat in the best sense: he figured out how to experiment with fresh ideas and put them to work in a hugely complex system like the University of California.

A few years ago, Herman Blake, UCSC's first African-American professor and the esteemed founding provost of Oakes College, told me that the longer he lives the more his respect for Clark Kerr and Dean McHenry grows because they put into play transcendent values that still guide him in his work with students in the 21st Century.

Having become a Quaker as a student at Swarthmore, Kerr came to believe 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. I can't say for sure, but I believe that value may have been True North for his moral compass. I doubt that Chancellor McHenry, a plain-spoken man,

would put it that way, but judging by his actions, I feel confident that he was quite comfortable with it. I am certain that they shared other core values.

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

Ansel Adams called it “The Athens of the West”. Kerr dubbed it “Swarthmore in the redwoods.” Noble phrases for a noble enterprise. I believe that the Smith Renaissance Society shows that with imagination, commitment, and a modest amount of money *that* nobility can live on.

As I look ahead I do worry about what happens if I am unable to raise the funds we need. I shared Thanksgiving dinner with an investment banker from Lazard Freres, a civic-minded guy who seemed interested in what we do. “It sounds scalable,” he said, meaning, I suppose, that it could be cranked out in enough places to interest serious investors. “I don’t care about being scalable,” I shot back, an ancient knot forming in my stomach. “Then you’re just being eccentric,” he replied.

Between then and now I have thought about that quite a bit. Is this just a case of William the incorrigible being stubborn? Or might I be right in my belief that we are at a major crossroad in this country and that heading down the path marked “small is beautiful” is the sane way to go? There’s probably no one right answer.

But the UCSC that the founders had in mind *was* eccentric, a daring response to the cold impersonality of a Berkeley. And just as Cowell was soon joined by Stevenson, Crown, Merrill, and the later colleges, I believe what we created can be copied and customized right here. In fact, inspired by Chancellor Blumenthal, some of us are in the early stages of doing just that for UCSC's undocumented immigrant students.

To me it's not mainly about money. Having had the good fortune to be lifted up by the vision and commitment of Clark Kerr, Dean McHenry, and Page Smith, for me it's about the moral imperative to remember, be grateful, and do the same for others.

I would like that and my incorrigibility to be my legacy.