

**Inaugural Address**

**Claudia A. Limbert, President**

**Mississippi University for Women**

**Whitfield Hall—Rent Auditorium**

**Friday, October 17, 2002 at 4:00 p.m.**

I would like to welcome all members of the stage party and the program participants, distinguished delegates, faculty, staff, students, alumni, and friends of Mississippi University for Women.

I especially want to acknowledge the selfless and untiring dedication of Justice Lenore Prather for her leadership and her accomplishments as Interim President of this great university.

I would also like to welcome two of my sons—Eric and Jeffrey—who here today as well as recognize my son, Mark, and my daughter, Stephanie, who could not be here but who will be visiting MUW later. I love you very much. I need to acknowledge dear friends who are here physically or in spirit. I thank both my children and my friends for their love and support.

I want to thank the members of the planning committee who worked so hard on this event and all the events of this week on behalf of MUW.

As soon as the date for the inauguration was announced, people began asking what my topic would be.

Those who know me know that I listen more than I speak and that I speak only when I have something meaningful to say; therefore, I have torn up many attempts at this speech. But, in the end, I decided that I wanted to speak about two topics: The first is MUW's plan for the future, which you probably expected me to talk about. The second may not be quite as expected, because it is my very personal realization of what the lack of a college education can do to an individual.

First, let's talk about MUW's goals for the future.

At bedtime, when I was a little girl, my mother would often read to me or recite poems. I remember one poem in particular—Eugene Field’s “Wynken, Blynken, and Nod.” The majority of the poem really didn’t interest me. My mind would always stick on the first few lines:

Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one night

Sailed off in a wooden shoe,

Sailed on a river of crystal light into a sea of dew.

“Where are you going and what do you wish?”

The old moon asked the three—

--and I really never would hear the rest of the poem. That sentence is the point where my attention was always caught: “Where are you going and what do you wish?”

When I interviewed for this position, I was basically asking everyone connected with the interview process a version of that same question: “Where are you going and what do you wish?”—as an institution.

They consistently produced the same wish list. They wanted lots of positive PR, they wanted an increased student enrollment base, and they wanted ways to bring in some badly needed income—particularly in this time of state budget cuts and escalating costs.

Working as a team, we have already made a good start in all three areas and will continue those efforts.

As far as “lots of positive PR” goes, everyone is commenting on our positive and increased media presence. MUW has some wonderful stories

to tell and we are getting them out there in a timely way, stories that include our being ranked as the no. 1 best value among all Southern master's universities by *U.S. News & World Report* and our being ranked by *Kiplinger's* as no. 69 out of a select list of the 100 best public colleges in the United States.

We will always need to pay attention to the second goal—increasing enrollment, but we note a positive beginning. This fall saw us with a 36% rise in first-time, full-time students and a 6% rise in transfer students from the community colleges. Those students will provide a solid base for future enrollment growth.

The third goal that surfaced during the interviews was how to bring in additional income. We are attacking this in several ways. We will soon be hiring a Vice President for Institutional Advancement. That person will do a feasibility study, establish a prioritized menu of donor opportunities, and launch a capital campaign. We will also hire a grant writer to help us write state, federal, and foundation grants. We have visited our senators and representatives in Washington, DC, to establish a relationship with them to facilitate additional funding. Also, we are developing a licensing plan that will include establishing a consistent logo identity for MUW as part of a collegiate licensing program to include logo usage and royalty rates. Additionally, we are looking for ways to increase campus usage during the summer by bringing in more summer camps and conferences.

**Besides the three goals identified during the presidential search process, there are other things in the works that will also have a positive effect on our future—to help us answer that question, “Where are you going and what do you wish?”**

**Across the United State, all institutions of higher learning are facing a budgetary crisis. Because statistics clearly demonstrate that the economic health of any state is directly tied to the higher education attainment of its citizens, it is imperative that we help find a way to not only increase the coming year’s state allocation for the IHL institutions, but that we also help find a way to stabilize our annual budgets so that we can plan for the future rather than just react to the present. Therefore, we will work closely with the other IHL institutions, our IHL Board, and the legislature to look for ways to do this.**

**Very soon, we will begin a formal facility master plan. It will enable us to be plan-ful in how we use our campus and help us allocate our facility dollars more wisely. We will begin by looking at parking, security, outdoor lighting, and both pedestrian and vehicular traffic. From there, we will look at our buildings and develop a plan for their individual renovation and best use. As we create our facility master plan, we will consider aesthetics equally with utility.**

**I am working with the Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Committee in consulting campus constituencies about their goals for the**

future. A strategic plan for the next four years will be published in early December.

Any good planning process includes planning for technology and we are doing that too, because we realize that technology is an important teaching and communication tool. We will be electronically linking various units dealing with student records in order to expedite working with those records, including financial aid and on-line registration. We are also developing a life cycle for computer replacement that will allow us to be proactive about our technology needs. Our goal is to work smarter, not harder.

A real strength of MUW is the relevance and quality of our academic programs, so it is a given that we will continue to sustain healthy programs and develop signature academic programs.

Since MUW has always been student-focused, we continue to seek ways to enhance our students' time with us, not only inside the classroom but also outside the classroom. Besides what we already have in place, we have just opened a 4,000 square foot, state-of-the-art Fitness Center filled with exercise equipment. Recently launched is an initial program of institutional scholarships to allow our students to study abroad, because we recognize that a well-prepared university graduate must be a citizen of the world. We have formed an organization for the 34% of our student body who are adult learners and have found a lounge space for them. Knowing that a number of our students (particularly our international

students from 25 countries) do not have cars, we have established a weekend program that provides transportation to get the students out and about. And, recognizing that more than 14% of our students are male, we are forming a male student group to look for ways to make their experience here at MUW a rewarding one.

I have been out visiting anyone who will talk with me as I seek to learn more about the area and MUW's place in it. In particular, I am visiting the community colleges, attempting to strengthen our ties with them. We will also be seeking ways to connect and help with the initiatives of various community and civic groups, providing expertise and assistance wherever we can.

On campus, I have instituted weekly two-hour Open Door sessions where anyone can come visit me without an appointment. Those sessions have been very useful and, in fact are so useful, that I plan to take my Open Door sessions statewide and meet with a wide range of people to engage in what I call a "statewide conversation." My goals are to discover how MUW is doing and to learn how we can better serve the state of Mississippi.

These items are only the tip of the iceberg. We have a great deal to get done, but it won't be done tomorrow or with the wave of a magic wand. It will only be accomplished through hard work, creative problem solving, a positive attitude, and a team effort that utilizes everyone's talents. We will continue to be the university that offers a private school education at a public school price.

**And now I would like to talk about education from a purely personal perspective.**

**You may know that I was born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks. The people of the Ozark Mountains share many characteristics with the people of Mississippi. The accent is similar, we like the same foods (Including okra, catfish, and greens), we know how to work hard, we use many of the same expressions—and both the people of the Missouri Ozarks and the people of Mississippi are natural story-tellers. So, today, I would like to tell you a story—a true story that may explain why I have devoted my life to education and, in particular, to higher education.**

**Many of you here today have enjoyed the privilege of a college education. And, for many of you, being surrounded by educated people, particularly educated women who received their educations here at MUW, is not an unusual experience.**

**But in many places in the United States, a woman attending college and getting a degree is still something fairly new.**

**In my own case, I almost didn't go to college since, before I was thirty-five, college was never an option for me. As I mentioned earlier, I was born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks, a member of a family for whom the term "poverty-stricken" would have meant a distinctly upward social step. No one in my family had ever graduated from college. In fact, until I came along, no one in my family had even graduated from high school.**

And not only did I graduate from high school, but I graduated as the class valedictorian. Sounds wonderful, doesn't it? But what did it mean? Scholastically, it meant that I stood on the high school stage, receiving both my diploma and a full university scholarship. Practically speaking, it meant that the very next day I went to the principal and declined the scholarship. Why? Because, although I had the scholarship to pay for my tuition to that university, I didn't have the money to pay for room and board, textbooks, or even a bus ticket to get there. And I was too ashamed to say so—to say, "Please help me go to college."

So, like most of my female classmates who either married right out of high school or before finishing high school or who became salesclerks at Woolworths or waitresses at the drive-in restaurant or cleaned other women's houses or became secretaries, I became a secretary.

At twenty, I married and then had four wonderful children whom I loved very much—all the while feeling guilty because I wanted more in my life: I wanted an education. For me, it was not just getting that magic piece of paper; it was finding someone to talk with about the armloads of books that I brought home from the library each week. Also, I wanted to show someone the bits and pieces of fiction writing that I was doing and ask them: Is this any good?

Obviously, at thirty-five, I found a way to go to college and graduate school which is another story but not the one I am telling here today.

Today, I want to talk about something else. Recently, a friend asked why I had continued to dream of someday going to college when it had looked impossible for so many years. Why hadn't I just given up? When she asked me this, I had no answer—I just shrugged. But the question continued to nag at me: Why hadn't I given up? Now, I think that I have the answer to her question.

I believe that I persevered in my dream of getting a higher education because of three women who gave me this dream as you might hand someone a precious gift—maybe not directly—but they gave it to me nonetheless even though they themselves had never had the advantage of an education—three strong women who suffered more than most of us could bear, women who dared to dream even when few if any of their dreams ever came true. And the funny thing is that every time I stand before a class or read a short story to an audience or give a speech, I feel these three women standing beside me. And, as in long ago yesterdays, they stand here with me today: my grandmother, my mother, and a woman named Ruth.

Grandma and Grandpa Tucker—my mother's parents—came to live with us when I was a toddler, when their own personal poverty became unbearable and it was thought that it would be better financially for us all to live together. I can still see Grandma in my mind—short and rather wide and extremely quiet.

Grandma Tucker was Cherokee, her ancestry clearly written in the shape of her head and her high, wide cheekbones. The thing I remember most about Grandma was the silence that I just mentioned.

As a child, I had always wondered why Grandma didn't say much. After all, the grandmothers of my friends always seemed to be talking and laughing. So it wasn't as if older women didn't feel free to express themselves even in a time and place where women were supposed to keep their silence. No, I think there was more to it than that with Grandma. I think Grandma's silence had to do with her Cherokee heritage, an area of her life that she kept completely walled off, even from her family.

I remember once when Grandma and I were stringing beans and I glanced up to catch her looking at me. I asked her what she was thinking about. Caught off guard, she said, "Honey, you look just like your daddy. Lookin' at you, no one would ever guess you had any Indian blood. Don't you tell them. It's a lot easier that way."

I have a few more mental snapshots of Grandma—fragmented recollections of her since she wouldn't allow her photograph to be taken.

In one, it is a muddy Ozark early spring day, and I am tagging along with Grandma who is carrying a burlap bag and an old curved knife with a bone handle. She is gathering wild greens to supplement our end-of-the-winter diet when most of what she called the "garden truck" that she had canned the previous summer was gone. I remember trailing along behind Grandma, walking through abandoned fields, enveloped in a silence that

was only broken when she would stop to cut something. "Them's poke weeds," she would say. "It ain't safe to eat nothin' but the new growth at the tips of them plants. Remember that now." Then, Grandma would show them to me, cut them off, and add them to the bag.

Another mental snapshot of Grandma is one of her standing in the middle of her beloved flock of chickens, her arm arcing outward as she flung handfuls of feed to the chickens as they swirled around her feet.

I also connect Grandma with actual classroom schooling, which is my point here today. No, she had little formal education, having only finished the sixth grade. But, even though she couldn't put it into words, she instinctively wanted more for me.

When I was a little girl, there were no public kindergartens in our area. Unless a child's parents had the money to pay for a private kindergarten, a child waited until first grade to enter school. So, my parents took it for granted that my education would begin with first grade. Grandma didn't.

I can remember quite clearly a day when I must have been about five. Almost as if she were preparing for some kind of religious rite, Grandma carefully put a new piece of red and white checked oilcloth on the kitchen table. Then, ceremoniously, she sharpened a new pencil with a kitchen knife and slowly wrote out the alphabet on the Big Chief tablet where she composed her grocery lists. Showing me how to hold the pencil, she sat beside me, guiding my hand as I printed the letters. I can still smell that

new oilcloth and the cedar aroma of the freshly sharpened pencil. And I can still hear Grandma encouraging me to keep trying even when my fingers cramped from the effort: "Don't give up, honey. You'll get the hang of it sooner or later and, someday, you'll be a real scholar," she said.

And when I started school, Grandma always walked me the two miles there and back--a matter of eight miles everyday for an elderly woman whose varicose veins were so bad that I recall one bursting, flooding the kitchen floor with her blood as she stood washing the dishes one evening. Yes, this woman valued what she called "book-larning" and, by osmosis, I learned to value it too. Grandma stands here beside me today.

And Mama--my beloved Mama--also stands beside me today.

Mama was a little woman--5'2" and with a size 5 1/2 shoe. And she was a beautiful woman even though now I realize that Mama felt more comfortable wearing a disguise. By this, I mean she "painted" as it was called then and bleached her hair to a Jean Harlow platinum at a time when "ladies" as opposed to "women" didn't use makeup or hair coloring of any kind—at least not in our little Ozark town. But, more exactly, what I mean by disguise is that I think Mama was creating a persona for herself, because she felt that—otherwise—she did not count as a person.

Mama had every reason to believe that she did not count in our society. She had every strike against her. She had come from a background that many were quick to label "white trash." Her family was dysfunctional with her mother—my Grandma Tucker—being so alienated

from the white-dominated society in which she found herself that she was not able to show Mama any affection and her father—my Grandpa Tucker—a housepainter who battled alcoholism until he died from cirrhosis of the liver when I was about five. One of Mama's two younger brothers was, because of a birthing problem, retarded. Her other brother had run away from home at sixteen and, with false papers, had entered the army, where he would repeat the pattern of working his way up through the ranks before being rapidly being demoted due to his own problem with alcohol.

Unlike her brother, Mama couldn't run away from any of her problems at home, at least not by joining the army. Instead, she began trying a variety of escapes, battering away at the box in which she found herself. First, she auditioned with a traveling band whose lead singer had just quit. Having a beautiful voice and newly bleached hair, she easily won the audition but, when it came time to get on the bus with the band, she lost her nerve and returned home.

Mama's next try at escape was a more traditional one, marriage, but marriage to a man from the Liverpool slums who had come to this country looking for a way out of his own predicament. I'm sure that you will not be surprised to learn that their marriage was terribly unhappy. Nowadays, Mama could have just filed for divorce, but that wasn't an option then. The pressures of her church and of her community kept her married, the arguments and Mama's desperation increasing as time went on.

**Mama had found a way to get more education and a way to hold a job. Even though she hadn't finished high school, during World War II, she had taken advantage of a government program to train badly need practical nurses. I don't know much about this program except that she had done part of her student practice in a mental hospital and whatever she had seen there caused her to wake screaming in her sleep the rest of her life.**

**Mama worked as an office nurse for an obstetrician whose patients tended to come from the wealthy families in town. But he also had to take a certain number of welfare patients due to county requirements. Mama worked 5 1/2 days a week and, at night, was always on call to assist him in deliveries. Indeed, Mama often arrived at the hospital just in time to deliver the baby herself, although the patient, heavily anesthetized as they were in those days, never knew it. Sometimes too, the doctor would ask her to turn a difficult baby because she had tiny but very strong hands.**

**Mama was excruciatingly polite to the wealthy patients, afraid of them really, apt to look down at the floor and somehow almost disappear in their presence. As a teenager, this bothered me although now I can understand why she did this. I realize that Mama felt insecure because these women had the benefit of some kind of education and she did not.**

**However, Mama was very close to the welfare mothers. She kept all the medicine samples, especially the vitamins, that the pharmaceutical salesmen had left and made sure that those welfare mothers got whatever**

they needed. And they loved her for it. Several later told me that they prayed for her everyday.

But their prayers weren't enough. Mama was trapped inside a marriage that was getting worse and worse. My father's black rages had begun to manifest themselves at work, and he was regularly fired, going for long periods without work with Mama being the only breadwinner for our extended family.

Not only was Mama frustrated in her marriage, but she also had no outlet for what I now realize was her great intellectual and artistic potential. Although she possessed a fine, though untrained soprano voice, she could not sing professionally. Although she could draw or paint anything that she saw, she did not have the money for lessons or to pay entrance fees to get them into contests. And although she had a talent for writing, her first magazine rejection totally destroyed her already frail self-confidence as a writer.

Mama's one outlet was reading. When I think of Mama, I remember a winter evening. Mama is sitting in an armchair, her tired feet in a pan of warm water, the lamp making a halo of her blonde hair. She is holding a book in her hands and seems miles away. Mama was constantly reading and I think that her reading was one form of escape for her.

But, after a while, even reading couldn't help Mama escape from her horrible marriage or her exhausting job or her tremendous feelings of

inferiority. Only an education could have helped with any of this and Mama just didn't have that option.

So, at the age of forty-three, after attempting it several times, Mama committed suicide, dying alone on the living room floor, her stomach full of pills and the blood from her slashed wrists in pools around her. Beside her lay the telephone. I still think about that scene and about that telephone and I wonder whom Mama had been trying to call and what Mama had wanted to say. I think about that a great deal. While I will never know whom Mama was calling or what her last words would have been had she been able to say them, I do know one thing. Mama stands here with me today and I feel that she is proud that I got the education that she had always wanted but never had the opportunity to get.

The third woman standing here with me here today is a woman named Ruth White. When Mama had begun to despair that she would ever find a babysitter whom she could afford and whom she could trust, Ruth came like magic to take care of my younger sister and me so that Mama could work the extra hours she needed to support the family.

Ruth must have been about thirty-five when she applied for the job. She had left her previous position when her employer had left the state. And Ruth was willing to work for the little Mama could afford to pay her, because she wanted a job where she could take care of children.

Ruth's story was tragic but not unusual. She was a tall, raw-boned hill woman who had married a man about forty years older than she,

because marriage was expected of her and because he had asked her to marry him. So, she became the caretaker for an old man who constantly made fun of her lack of looks, cruelly making reference to her badly scarred legs, the result of an earlier job in a candy factory when she had backed into an open gas heater and her dress had caught fire. This man also made fun of Ruth's barely finishing fourth grade and her lack of general polish.

He was right about that last point. Ruth had little polish. Her voice was rough, her hill accent heavy, her grammar faulty, and her tastes ran to True Confession Magazine and real backwoods country music. But Ruth knew how to love and she loved my sister and me. She also knew how to play and was eager to teach us all kinds of games. Ruth taught us how to jump rope, how to play jacks, and took us on a series of what she called "adventures"—anywhere the local country bus system could reach.

But although Ruth had limitless amounts of love to give, she had been limited in the kind of husband that she could attract, in the kind of job that she could hold, in the kind of social respect that she received from those she termed "her betters." And I realized, even as a little girl, that this all stemmed from Ruth's lack of education and the skills and the confidence that such an education can bring to one's life.

So, today, as I stand here, three other women stand with me: my grandmother, my mother, and a woman named Ruth. And, as I look at you in this auditorium, I see many other women. Yes, whether you are male or

**female, behind each and every one of you stand women, their hands upon your shoulders. These women may not have been our role models because they had college degrees but rather they were our role models because they not only valued an education but also because they showed us, sometimes in a tragic way, what might happen to us if we didn't complete our own educations. These women loved us when, sometimes, it seemed that no one else loved us. These women sacrificed so that our lives could be better than theirs had been.**

**Today, we need to remember those women who came before us, who made a path for us to follow, and who encouraged us to continue along that path when it would have been easier for us to stop. Let us remember them today in love and vow to do for others what these women once did for us -- to share our educations so that the next generation—men and women—will have more.**

**Here at MUW, we will continue to honor the women who made the path for other women, but we also honor our male students who are similarly creating the path for other men to receive a higher education.**

**Thank you for your kindness today, for helping us celebrate MUW's past and anticipate our meeting all the goals that will enable MUW to have a bright future, and for allowing me to be part of that future. It is indeed an honor to serve as MUW's president.**