



Inaugural Address

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Tenth President of Salisbury University

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In 1996, during my first semester as a teaching assistant at the University of Florida, Michele was a student in my Introduction to Journalism course. Michele was a talented writer and a strong editor. Her dream was to pursue a career in journalism in a big city. Having just left Manhattan where I was a magazine editor, I was eager to help her. We spent weeks fine-tuning her applications and writing portfolio. The following semester, she came to my office, bursting with excitement at the news of an interview she secured for an internship in New York City with a publication she greatly admired. Her biggest problem? It wasn't preparing for the interview. And it wasn't funding the travel to get from Gainesville to Manhattan. Her biggest problem was the weather.

She had lived in a small, rural town in Florida her entire life. Michele did not own a coat – or any clothing that was heavier than her usual tank top and shorts. Having spent my entire life growing up in New York, and given that it was mid-February, I knew she needed a warm coat! Not wanting her to have to bear the financial burden of purchasing new clothes, I loaned her one of my coats and my favorite sweater that would be suitable for her interview and would hopefully bring her a bit of good luck.

A few weeks later she was back in my office. With excitement, she reported her interview had gone well and that she accepted the offer as an editorial intern for the summer. She then thanked me for the clothes and handed me a small bag and a note.

I'll admit it, as a brand-new graduate teaching assistant, I was *pretty* proud of myself. I had helped a student land an

internship that was going to catapult her ahead toward a wonderful career – and I had done so in my very first year of teaching. I was bursting with pride. Clearly, I was going to be an incredible teacher if this was the kind of result I could expect to make happen already.

When I got home, I opened the bag and the note. I realized she had kindly washed and dried the sweater. Only one problem. She had not realized the sweater was made of wool. And now, my favorite sweater was about the size of something that would fit an American Girl doll.

I then opened the note, and this is – more or less – what it said:

Dear Prof. Lepre,

New York is going to be amazing! But I'm really sorry about shrinking your sweater – I had no idea that would happen! But on the plus side, I'll think of you every time I do my laundry.

Now I could have let this moment dissuade me from a life in higher education. I had just experienced a year filled with blood, sweat, and tears; of grading and lecturing; and of mentoring and listening. And if the biggest take-away my best student had after all of that was that you shouldn't put wool in the dryer – maybe I should rethink my career choices.

But a funny thing happened, and I bet many of us here today can relate. Instead of being discouraged or doubting what I was doing mattered in some way, I saw the humor in it, and I chose to see that if I had made *any difference at all* in her life – that was something to be proud of. And so, the feeling of having an impact on a student's life took root in my brain somewhere, and it started to grow.

And I kept moving forward, slowly but surely ahead toward **today** and this amazing life as a college educator.

And what a day it is.

Chancellor Perman has given me permission to go off script for one second to tell this story.

Earlier in the week, we had to take the tent down – some of you saw the tent going up – and I said, “Oh my gosh, is it going to rain ... is it going to rain?”

Everybody said, “No, it’s not going to rain.”

And I remembered what my mother said to me right before our wedding. She said, “I have a friend who says if you just hang a rosary in the bushes outside the house toward the site, it won’t rain.”

I went home, and I found a rosary, and I put it outside my house.

Ahh, thank you Mom!

A presidential inauguration serves as a milestone event in the life of an academic institution, often attributed to building momentum for the University as it embarks upon the next chapter in its story. This is just the 10th time since 1925 that Salisbury University has welcomed a new President. This is an opportunity to honor the University’s heritage, remember our traditions and our commitment to learning, and to bring our Sea Gull family together to celebrate and re-affirm our sense of pride in our students, alumni, faculty, staff, and our community. It is a special moment!

It is certainly a deeply meaningful day for me personally, and I stand here today full of gratitude and humility as I consider the responsibility you have invested in me. It has offered me an opportunity to reflect on my career in higher education. Today has reaffirmed: I could not imagine having spent my life doing anything else. I will never stop being thankful that somehow, somehow, Salisbury University and I found each other in this time and place.

As I pondered what I wanted to say to you all, I kept coming back to the idea of forward momentum. When I think about my own life, I recollect moments like Michele’s success – and my poor tiny sweater. Those small, almost seemingly insignificant moments that take shape and connect together like Legos until we find ourselves standing on a foundation sturdy and strong enough to build upon.

My very presence here is a testament to the power of foundation – the power of family, of friends, of colleagues, of mentors, and of community. I have been incredibly fortunate to have had some of the fiercest advocates and supporters throughout my life. I am surely stronger for their influence and wish to make sure they know the impact they have on who I am, how I think, and why I lead.

Let me begin by thanking some of the many people who have collectively played such an instrumental role in both my personal foundation and the foundation of this great University.

To Secretary Jake Day and Mayor Jack Heath, thank you for being here with us and for your unwavering support of Salisbury University.

A sincere thank you to all the elected officials and community leaders who have taken the time out of what I know is a busy schedule to celebrate with us. Thank you for all you do on behalf of our University and region. You help make what we do possible.

Chancellor Perman, your wisdom and guidance these past months have been invaluable. The support you have graciously provided me has been a constant presence I have come to count on and appreciate greatly. You have made me feel welcome, and at home, in the University System of Maryland family.

Our Board of Regents Chair Linda Gooden, I cannot thank you, and all of the Regents, enough for the trust you have placed in me. You have empowered me and believed in me to lead this remarkable university. I am grateful and strive every

day to be the leader this campus needs. Thank you for being here.

I am grateful to the delegates who are here with us representing other academic institutions. Their names are listed in our inauguration program, and I am deeply appreciative they were able to take the time to be here. A special thanks to my fellow presidents and those from the University System of Maryland – I am honored to serve alongside you as we work for the betterment of the entire State of Maryland and our nation.

Thank you Dr. Clark, my dear Naeemah, for your kind words. You've been with me since just about the very beginning of this journey and I am honored that you are here today.

Dr. Leonard – Lili – we are all so deeply appreciative of your leadership of our Alumni Association, and I am personally thankful for your passion for Salisbury University. Your enthusiasm is contagious. And how about our parade of alumni representing each graduating class since our founding? What a joy to see you back on campus!

Jennifer, Joe, Tim, Nicholas, and Wyatt – thank you for your kind words of greeting and thank you for all you do for Salisbury University and its people. I look forward to our work ahead.

To my cabinet, joining me here on the platform – the passion you bring to serving our University fills me with inspiration each and every day. I could not imagine working alongside a more committed, compassionate, and creative group of people. Thank you for your dedication.

To my colleagues on the faculty and staff, it is an honor to work with you and to learn from you as we fulfill our institution's mission.

And to all the students who are here today – among those in attendance are representatives from the Presidential Citizen Scholars, student-athletes, Student Government Association, members of our Multicultural Alliance, and more – thank

you. You are the reason we are here!

As Isaac Newton stated: “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Nine exceptional people have stood where I stand now – as President of Salisbury University. Each building off the other and carrying this institution to new heights. I am grateful to all of Salisbury University's previous presidents, including Dr. Janet Dudley-Eshbach and Dr. Chuck Wight, who, I am thrilled to say, are both with me on the platform. I'm grateful to you for laying the foundation upon which our University will continue to grow.

Thank you to *all* who worked on putting together today's event and all the Inauguration week activities, which highlighted so much of what is extraordinary about Salisbury University. It was an amazing week. From the fun we had at our Multicultural Festival; the faculty, staff, and students we celebrated during the Diversity Awards; to the inspiring conversations had during our academic panels; to our day of service activity, where we assembled more than **250 cancer care** kits that will be donated to our regional hospitals; and the ice cream social we had yesterday afternoon with our students – it was a vivid display of why Salisbury University is a place of belonging, collaboration, and engaged learning. Thank you all.

Some very special friends have made it here from the University of Florida, the University of Tennessee, Marist College, and Radford University – thank you. I am honored that you have made the trip.

Finally, there are some special people sitting right here in the front row ... my family. My brother Matthew, his wife Christy, and my nephew Jack and his girlfriend DeKayla are here from Steamboat Springs, CO. I'm honored to have my two fathers-in-law Dan and Bob and my mother-in-law Marianne in the audience today. I'm thankful that my brother-in-law Scott and his wife Christina made the trip from across the bridge to celebrate with us on the beautiful Eastern Shore.

I'm thrilled beyond words that my father, James Ringer, is here. If you ever want to know **why** I am **who** I am, spend 15 minutes talking to this guy. I've never known anyone with a kinder temperament, a gentler spirit, a stronger work ethic, or a bigger heart than my dad. Thank you, Dad, for teaching me what is most important in this life.

My husband Todd – it is hard to believe that we have been together now for almost 27 amazing years. Thank you for your support through our happy life together and for being with me since day one of this academic adventure – from graduate school to my first teaching job to those first forays into administration. I'm not sure you ever expected people to be calling you first gentleman, but you wear this role like a comfortable coat, and I am proud to stand by your side.

And my incredible daughters Sarah and Ainsley – I could spend the rest of this address talking about the two of you and how proud I am to be your mom. Thank you for your patience and for the sacrifices you've sometimes had to make because I was at work. I am in awe of each of you, and I hope you know that in every college student's face I see yours, and I strive to make decisions as if each student I come across is my own. You inspire me and I love you very much.

And, finally, at the risk of a tear or two, I want to acknowledge two people who aren't physically here with us today but are most definitely here in spirit – my dear mom Jaquelyn Ringer and my mother-in-law Nancy Hamner. These smart, compassionate women set an incredible example of how to be brave, how to be strong, and how to care for others. They believed in me so much that it empowered me to have the confidence to become something I never would have dreamed possible. I miss them every day, and I would not be here without them.

As you can see, my life has been filled with people who have invested their time, their energy, and their encouragement in my future. It has also been a life filled with people who believed in the importance of higher education.

STEADILY FORWARD

Salisbury University has grown and thrived in much the same way – with the power of people who believed in her and a community that came together to support her.

On Wednesday, October 17, 1923, a small group of people gathered in a field about 300 feet behind us to break ground on what would become the newest Maryland State Normal School. Two years later, the normal school opened its doors to students in large part thanks to the commitment and perseverance of Dr. William J. Holloway, the man who would become our first president.

He believed that a normal school – so named to reflect that this school would be providing the “norm” or the standard of excellence in teacher education – would be pivotal to meet the state's demand for rural teachers. Before the founding of the Salisbury Normal School, Eastern Shore students who wish to receive teacher training had to move to the western shore or out of state. But Dr. Holloway believed! And when it opened with 105 students – 100 girls and five boys who “braved the situation to seek knowledge” – he already saw success. And so began Salisbury University's forward progress; not always smooth, not always easy, but steadily forward.

And progress it has. For the past 98 years, our University has held fast to its core values while growing and changing with student demand and the needs of our state and nation. Our institution moved forward!

Throughout my time here at SU, I have repeatedly been struck by the comparisons between our institution's tenacious history and the incredible things I see being accomplished on our campus today.

We have seen name changes: from our beginnings as a normal school, to a teachers college, to Salisbury State College, to Salisbury State University, and to the Salisbury University it is today. Our institution expanded and innovated – and constantly defied expectations.

In 1935, we saw the start of a core curriculum, focused on coursework in humanities and science that expanded our transfer populations, breaking from the status quo for a normal school.

Today, we are on the verge of launching a groundbreaking new General Education curriculum that will serve the needs of today's student by moving away from a set of courses from different disciplines to a more holistic, student-centered approach, preparing students for success in college, career, and life.

In 1949, the Student Government Association – ahead of its time – saw the need to provide opportunities for internationalization – unusual for a teachers college – and raised enough money for an annual scholarship to send one student abroad – our first student, Mr. J. Walter Potter, spent the summer studying at the University of Zurich.

Compare that with what we have today: We are the **number one** producer of Fulbright Students in the nation in the Master's Carnegie Classification. And **all** our students now have the chance to see the world! We have hundreds of study abroad programs to choose from in just about any country in the world, and we provide scholarships and awards to support students who do not have the financial means to participate in these high-impact experiences on their own.

In the 1960s, we offered our first *non-education* degree program in arts and sciences – and the University officially shifted to a liberal arts college.

In 1970, the Maryland Council for Higher Education considered closing our doors, and the City of Salisbury saved us, thanks to the relationships built by then-president Dr. Norm Crawford, setting an example for what strong town-gown partnerships can look like. The Greater Salisbury Committee, the Salisbury Area Chamber of Commerce, and the Salisbury City Council came to our aid. They noted the University must be saved, as without **us** the extraordinary

education of local youth would be hindered, as would the cultural and social life, business activity, and economic growth of the region – and it surely would have.

Defying expectations yet again, we emerged from this crisis offering new majors, including economics, sociology, theatre, and business administration.

And we grew! In fact, by 1974 we were victims of our own success and hit a crisis point, when we grew so big, we didn't have room to house our students! Students were living three to a room that was meant for two, some housed at a nearby motel, and even a few were apparently housed in the basement of the president's home! And again, with innovation and drive, we met student needs, renovated buildings, built new dormitories, and secured funding to support our thriving institution.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, during the 15 years our University had Dr. Thomas Bellavance at the helm, we **leapt forward** toward national prominence as a “community of scholars.” We sought to increase our academic reputation and stake our claim to the public ivy title. Our operating budget tripled. We hired distinguished faculty, increased our endowment, and evolved from a college to a university to better reflect the quality of our educational experience.

Today, SU is ranked among the nation's best colleges.

Today, our faculty are not only teaching with greatness, but their research and service are changing our world for the better. Take for example, Dr. Angela Freeman, professor of biological sciences, who received a three-year, \$480,000 National Science Foundation grant to continue independent research into the neuroendocrinology of flying squirrel social behavior.

And, we celebrate Drs. Shanetia Clark, Althea Pennerman, Vincent Genareo, and Chin-Hsiu Chen, associate professors of early and elementary childhood education, who just last week received a nearly \$2.5 million grant from the Maryland

State Department of Education. These funds will support current child care workers and instructional assistants while they earn their bachelor's degrees and teaching certifications, and eliminate two of the biggest obstacles for those hoping to advance their teaching careers – time and money.

Then we have the impactful work being done by the SU-affiliated Eastern Shore Regional GIS Cooperative. They received a \$2.4 million grant from the Office of Statewide Broadband to develop data relating to broadband internet capacity across Maryland, with an overarching goal of providing high-speed digital access for all communities in the state.

Or how about our annual Philip E. and Carole R. Ratcliffe Foundation Shore Hatchery entrepreneurship competition? Since its inception in 2013, the program has invested \$1.9 million in area businesses, resulting in the creation of 678 jobs and the addition of some \$98 million to the regional economy.

And I could go on and on ... our faculty are changing lives and making a difference every day.

The 1980s not only marked a time of tremendous growth in our academic prowess, it was also a pivotal time for our athletics program. We won our first NCAA national championship in 1986 – in field hockey, in case you were wondering – setting the stage for three decades of dominance in multiple sports.

As of today, SU student-athletes have claimed 22 NCAA Division III team national championships in four sports and 24 individual national champions, in track and field, and wrestling. And I know we are not done! This semester alone, we have **four** teams who are poised for championship runs.

We have accumulated 191 conference championships over the past 28 years, across 17 sports. Forty-three of our students have been Academic All-Americans. And the outstanding Jim Berkman, our men's lacrosse coach, is

the all-time winningest coach in NCAA lacrosse history, surpassing 600 career wins this season.

Our athletics success isn't fleeting – it is a legacy.

Back to the 1990s: we also began to grow in a different way: More than \$47 million was spent on construction and improvements during this time, and our horticulturalists transformed the campus into a national arboretum – making it arguably one of the most beautiful campuses in the state. A forward-thinking notion: that the more comfortable a student feels in their college setting, the better their odds of success. These aren't just pretty trees – they are fostering an atmosphere of learning!

In 2001, Salisbury (now) University welcomed its first female president, Dr. Janet, who would lead the University for 18 years of enrollment growth; internationalization; the diversification of our faculty, staff, and student body; and program expansion to meet the needs of the Eastern Shore and our state.

And in 2020, our University was tested once again – as it has been again and again during our history – with a global pandemic. And once again, with scrappy energy and an all-hands-on-deck spirit, and the leadership of Dr. Chuck Wight, we not only survived, but we cared for our students and each other in ways we likely never dreamed possible. And we did come out stronger and prepared to move our Salisbury University forward once again.

And, as we look forward from this day, let me share two defining facts that illustrate how our **past, present, and future are deeply intertwined**.

We have not forgotten our roots as **the standard for excellence in teacher preparation and education** – nor will we. Since 1996, we have graduated 111 Maryland Teacher of the Year semi-finalists and three Maryland State Teacher of the Year winners. This year alone, we have four incredible alums who have been named as semi-finalists and will be competing for Teacher of the Year this fall.

And, just as of this week, I am happy to say that we are on track to welcome a remarkable new group of students in the fall, which will be **the most racially diverse in Salisbury history, with 32% of our incoming students coming from underrepresented backgrounds.**

FORWARD WITH PERSEVERANCE

For all our success, our history wasn't without its fair share of challenging moments.

Like any successful company or institution, growth (quality growth, anyway) often comes when it is faced with challenge, difficulty, and doubt. The best learning often comes from overcoming obstacles! It's how we respond to those challenges that defines who we are and what we will become. It is in failure that we break through mediocrity and find brilliance. As Samuel Beckett wrote: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Then, we can truly succeed.

I think when we look at what matters, in the victories we are proud of, they come when we have succeeded – moved forward – by persevering.

I admire this forward-thinking spirit, this can-do – and the "I can-do-it-myself-even-when-everyone-tells-me-I-can't" – spirit. The longer I serve as President of SU, I realize that maybe this is why I am so drawn to SU and its people. I'm like this too – never tell me I can't do something, or that I don't have time, or that it's too much. It might be one of my biggest flaws actually; I'm terrible at saying no or asking for help, though I hope my family would tell you I'm learning! But I see this energy in the people of the Eastern Shore – and those drawn to enroll here.

The Eastern Shore has a rich and varied history, with a strong tradition of grit and resilience among its people, particularly the watermen who have relied on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries for their livelihoods. The hardworking watermen, who harvested oysters, crabs, and

other seafood from the Chesapeake Bay, were known for their resilience, determination, and ingenuity as they faced the challenges of working in a dangerous and unpredictable environment. I see this willpower and fortitude in everyone I meet here. I believe this spirit is part of the DNA of the Eastern Shore.

I am proud to serve this community and to represent as best I can this quality that has defined our region and our university.

FORWARD WITH EXCELLENCE

For almost 100 years, Salisbury University has represented a microcosm for what learning – great learning – is. Progress. Challenge. Quiet success. Critical impact. Life-changing outcomes. Fierce pride. And yes, excellence.

Higher education has never been more important than it is right now. The critical conversations that we need to have, the thinking we need to do, the societal problems we need to solve, the ways we need to come together. I believe, deep down in my soul, that higher education IS the path to helping solve the world's biggest problems, and that each of us is called on to do what we can to pave the way for the next generation of learners.

Starting today, we move forward, toward SU's next chapter, and we turn our collective power, grit, dedication, and energy to moving **forward with excellence.**

Three months ago, I shared my State of Our University address with the campus community and outlined a vision for where we will go. Let me reiterate our primary goals today.

We will achieve excellence by investing in our people; strengthening our commitment to inclusion, diversity, equity, and the cultivation of a sense of belonging; and delivering a rigorous, student-focused academic program taught by world-class educators on a world-class campus, defining what distinction means for a regional comprehensive institution.

We will continue to serve the needs of the Eastern Shore, Maryland, and the nation, and most importantly, do so by remaining firmly committed to placing our students at the heart of everything we do.

And we will accomplish this together. Our collective power and energy will boldly propel our institution **forward with excellence**.

We will move forward with the purpose of transforming lives through academic excellence, life-changing high-impact practices, inclusion, and belonging.

We will work to disrupt the status quo, build pride in place, embody what it means to care for one another, and facilitate innovation so we can leave SU a better place than ever before.

We will strive for participation from every corner of campus so that SU can achieve this bold vision.

Because this is what we have *always* done. The heart of this institution will propel us forward.

A few weeks ago, a question was posed to me: What is the difference between success and significance? And I haven't stopped thinking about it since.

What **is** the difference between success and significance? I understand the premise behind the question: the idea that you could be viewed as successful, but not have had a long-standing, significant positive impact on the lives of others.

Significance is a group of dedicated educators breaking ground on a new school nearly 100 years ago.

Significance is watching former students be recognized as Teachers of the Year across the state.

Significance is sponsoring our very first student to study abroad, blazing a trail for our students to follow today.

Significance is a city saving a college from closing its doors.

Significance is welcoming the most diverse class in SU's history.

Significance is losing your favorite sweater so a student can triumph.

It is the cumulation of small, seemingly innocuous moments that lay the foundation for significance.

After all these years, I still think about Michele and that sweater. I didn't know it at the time, but what I considered a moment of success – helping a student land an internship – was really a moment of significance. Not because I did something significant, but because Michele did, or rather, she represented something significant. That moment serves as a constant reminder of why I do what I do – of why all of us in higher education do what we do. That we aren't just educating the minds of those around us with so-called book-smarts, we are helping generations of students mature, overcome challenge, broaden their perspectives, gain resiliency, *know their worth*, achieve their dreams, and yes, learn to do their laundry.

Let me close with this, a quote from my favorite author Louise Penny: "Life is choice. All day, every day. Who we talk to, where we sit, what we say, how we say it. And our lives become defined by our choices. It's as simple and as complex as that."

With great humbleness, I stand before you as Salisbury's 10th President, and I will work to make **this** choice every day: it will be my constant endeavor to serve this institution and our Sea Gull students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community, striving for a life of significance.

Thank you for being here today, I am so grateful for this tremendous honor.