



OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

WELCOME REMARKS FOR THE UTRAILBLAZERS RECEPTION

Presented by President Julio Frenk
at the University of Miami's Robert and Judi Prokop Newman Alumni Center
on February 24, 2017

Good afternoon, and thank you for joining me and the University community to celebrate the courage, contributions, and remarkable legacies of our UTrailblazers—the University of Miami's first black graduates.

I am delighted we are joined today by several members of the University of Miami Board of Trustees and University administration.

I want to congratulate the First Black Graduates Project committee and dozens of other dedicated Hurricanes who sifted through decades of yearbooks, unearthed records buried in the archives of UM Libraries' Special Collections, and orchestrated an unprecedented effort to connect with those who were powerful change agents during the 1960s and 1970s.

It was this legacy that most certainly guided the hearts of three alumni leaders—Denise Mincey-Mills, Antonio Junior, and Phyllis Tyler—who created the First Black Graduates Project four years ago to discover the untold stories of integration at their alma mater.

On behalf of the entire University of Miami family, thank you.

January 31, 1961 was a day of immense historic importance. That afternoon, the University of Miami's Board of Trustees, with 24 members in attendance—23 men, one woman, all white—unanimously voted to, and I quote, "accept any qualified student...regardless of race, creed, or color."

In that moment, this University became a great institution, able to acknowledge a historic wrong and affirm its aspiration to be a place where enlightened social transformation is possible—both for individuals and for society.

That vote by University leaders was the result of the work of many people, some of whom will never be acknowledged for the role they played. Most of them did not benefit from the change they helped create, but they worked to lay a path for those that followed.

This is the way of social change: It requires each one of us to act in many small and large ways, often over a long period of time, to enable more systemic progress to take place.

I am humbled to join you in acknowledging the people who came before us and made it possible for this University to continue on its path toward being a more just and equitable institution.

We are in a moment when universities must embrace the values and behaviors that we hope to see reflected in society. We must model integrity, respect, diversity, tolerance, resilience—these qualities are at the heart of what universities can and should be. This is what makes universities exemplary.

To achieve this aspiration, institutions of higher education must go beyond goodwill and the basic numbers of diversity to deliberately create conditions that bridge different races, ethnicities, and identities in a shared culture of belonging. Belonging is the sense that each of us is valued and can add value.

It is not enough to open our doors to a range of students—those students must feel able to engage, to challenge, to graduate, and to succeed. They must belong.

And how do we do that? I would suggest three areas of action that require our ongoing, deep commitment as an institution.

We must build campuses that are places of open, respectful dialogue and engagement. I believe that open exchange among people from different perspectives plants the seed from which empathy, productivity, and progress can flourish. We must engage with one another.

Second, we must acknowledge our past, and identify those persons who serve as beacons. We need individuals who let us know through their example that change is possible and that the often difficult work of building tolerance and understanding can have a real impact.

Nearly six decades ago Benny O'Berry became the first black graduate of the University of Miami. His experience was not an easy one, but he identified a path that others could follow.

We took more steps along that path with students like Harold Long and other members of United Black Students, who in 1968 staged a sit-in at the office of then-President Henry King Stanford to demand resources for black faculty, students, and curriculum. And President Stanford listened and acted.

The path toward justice was built by the people in this room—the UTrailblazers. And I am honored to be here to acknowledge the work and commitment that has led us to this moment.

Without the UTrailblazers, the work of current faculty, staff, and students would simply not be possible. We need those who came before us to guide us as we cultivate a campus where everyone knows they matter.

Many of those who blazed the trail of inclusion during the first two decades of the University's desegregation knew that admission didn't necessarily mean access.

And that brings me to the third area of work we need to emphasize. In addition to building a culture of belonging and acknowledging our history, we need to address the systems that prevent equality from flourishing.

The early trailblazers at UM knew that being admitted wasn't enough to ensure success. So they lobbied for support to enable qualified black students to pursue their dreams at the University.

This is the spirit of the phrase you'll see at UTrailblazers events—"blazing the trail, building the dream." The dream requires us to dismantle systems that obstruct equity and to build systems that enable it. One example is our priority to increase access to excellence for all qualified students at the University of Miami.

I am so proud of the Black Alumni Society and the First Black Graduates Project Committee for continuing to build the dream by creating the First Black Graduates Endowed Scholarship.

Endowed scholarships are crucial because they are permanent financial commitments to our students. They are a systemic way to ensure that our future is better than our present by building permanent pathways to education for generations to come.

As the University of Miami prepares to celebrate its centennial in 2025, we are working hard to cement our future by building endowed funds for student scholarships as well as endowed funds to support excellent faculty.

We want to ensure that the University of Miami is an example of enlightened social transformation, on our campus, throughout the hemisphere, and across the world.

We have gone from being an institution firmly under the grasp of the Jim Crow South to one that today is among the most diverse in the nation—not just in numbers, but in beliefs and in the range of disciplines and ideas that we explore here together. And we know that together, we must continue down the path toward a culture of belonging.

I want to thank you, our alumni and students, faculty and staff, who have worked so hard, who have held us accountable, and who continue to push us to be the best that we can be.

Thank you for building bridges not only to our past, but to our future. I am truly inspired by all your accomplishments.

This is more than a celebration for our black community. We are one U, and UTrailblazers is a celebration of our shared history.