**DESROCHES INVESTITURE SPEECH**

**Oct. 5, 2022**

**SECTION I. THANK YOUS.**

Ruth, thank you for your leadership. You have been a role model to generations and I am fortunate to call you a friend and mentor. I also want to thank you for bringing to life for me the lessons of empathetic leadership, which I hope to always emulate.

Distinguished and welcome guests, a heartfelt thank you for being here. I am honored. And I am humbled. For as I look around, what I see is excellence. Excellence in the legacy of the past and the current Board of Trustees members, many of whom are with us today. I see excellence as I look out on the environment that surrounds us — the magnificence of these grounds, its elevated architecture, and the spirit of our alumni who have walked these paths leading us to greater knowledge. I also see excellence in what borders these hedges and the opportunities that are afforded us as an integral part of one of the world’s most dynamic cities. Finally, and most importantly, I see excellence in the making, thanks to our incredible faculty, staff and the students we serve.

Before getting into where we are headed as an institution and what it will take to get there, I’d first like to take a moment to extend my gratitude to the many people who have paved my way to this podium.

First, I want to acknowledge David Leebron, along with his wife Ping Sun. David’s vision to push Rice outside the hedges has forever changed our University. His work to enhance the diversity and culture of inclusivity here has paved the way to a more equitable future for us all. On a personal note, his trust in hiring me five years ago, first as the Dean of Engineering and, more recently, as Provost during one of the most challenging times in our university’s history, allowed me to grow in new, sometimes unexpected ways. Thank you, David for all you have done for this university and our community. We will build on your many accomplishments.

I would like to thank the Trustees, past and present, for entrusting me with the honor of serving this institution. I am incredibly grateful for the incredible service you provide to Rice and the support you already have given me during my brief time as president. I also want to acknowledge the presence of Elizabeth Gillis, the widow of former president Malcom Gillis, to whom we owe so much. Elizabeth, I want to thank you and Malcolm for your leadership and service to Rice.

I am really pleased to see so many students in the audience today. Having you sit alongside many of our alumni, community members and supporters here provides a full accounting of what it truly means to be part of this incredible Rice family. In fact, let me acknowledge my current and former students. Trust me, I probably have learned more from you, than you have from me.

I particularly want to thank the faculty. I would not be here were it not for the support I received from you during my time at Rice.

I also want to thank the senior administrative staff who I have had the pleasure of working closely with as well as the entire staff of Rice who keep this university running so seamlessly. We are on this journey together and I am grateful for your presence.

Thank you to the many people from the city of Houston, local industry leaders, and members of the Texas Medical Center. I look forward to continuing to partner with you. [Quickly, let me acknowledge some of the public officials in the crowd today. *Acknowledge . .* ]

I’d also like to quickly mention a few others who have helped me achieve my dreams. First, those from my Georgia Tech family where I spent 18 years before coming to Houston. A special thank you goes to John and Karen Huff, Mike and Jenny Messner, Howard Tellepsen, Fort and Beth Flowers, Dick Bergmark, and my dear friend Larry Jacobs and his wife Kim.

Throughout my career, three mentors have had a profound impact on my career and development as a leader — Greg Fenves, president of Emory University who took a chance on me as a new Ph.D student 33 years ago; Gary May, chancellor of UC Davis, who has served as a role model for generations of young black students and faculty in STEM; and Ruth Simmons, who is one of the most highly regarded and admired university presidents in the United States. Greg, Gary and Ruth, for all that you have taught me, for all of the time you have given me, and for all of the support in me you have shown, thank you.

I am honored to have many family members and friends here today from across the country, including my oldest friends, Kent and Yves, whom I have known for more than 50 years, and my dearest friends from high school – Ken, Steven, Nick, and Keith! I made them sign an NDA not to disclose anything about my high school days.

To my own family. My three wonderful children, Andrew, Jacob, and Shelby. You taught me about unconditional love, and patience. I am beyond proud of the young adults you are becoming and of the values of kindness and gratitude you display on a daily basis.

Paula, my wonderful wife has been on this journey with me since I was a student at Berkeley. My #1 fan, she has been by my side through both successes and setbacks. She is a brilliant, accomplished healthcare professional who I credit for raising our children while working full time. She is one of the most caring and loving people I know and, as you get to know her, you will understand why I am her #1 fan and how important she is to any success I have. All my love and gratitude, Paula.

To my siblings, Lionel, Maggie, and Pascal, let me take this opportunity to publicly apologize for being such a difficult little brother as a child. As my 2nd set of parents when Mom and Dad were working, you were always there to protect me and stand up for me. You were my guardians and my inspiration.

None of my accomplishments would have been possible without the sacrifices of my parents. They left Haiti in the late 1960s for the U.S., solely to provide their children the opportunity for a better life. My mom worked two shifts for 30+ years while also making sure the family was fed, the house was clean and we were ready school the next day. My dad worked his entire career with one company, also working odd jobs on weekends. They did all of this so that their children could have educational opportunities and a life very different from theirs. As a result, I stand here today as President of Rice, Lionel is a physician in NY, Maggie is an attorney in NY, and Pascal is the CFO of AT&T and is now a Texan like me.

My mom died 11 years ago, but our Dad joins us here today in the audience. Thank you, Dad, for all that you have done for us.

My parents stressed the importance of hard work, resilience, being your very best, and always finishing what you start – no matter how difficult the task. They equally stressed the importance of humility, gratitude, listening carefully, and helping others who are less fortunate. These values are ingrained in my very being and have shaped me in both my personal and professional life.

**SECTION II. SETTING THE STAGE**

I am often asked why I left Georgia Tech to come to Rice as Dean of Engineering in 2017. I was at a very comfortable point in my career, leading one of the top Civil & Environmental Engineering programs in the world. Well, after 18 years in Atlanta, I could no longer take the heat and humidity, so I thought Houston would be a great break.

Seriously, I came to Rice because of its reputation and what I believed and, still believe, is the potential to be among the premier full spectrum research Universities in the world, with unparalleled commitment to undergraduate education.

I believe this is achievable even more today given our exceptionally talented and committed students, staff, and faculty, the progress we have made on a number of fronts in the past couple of years, the support of a dynamic and exciting city, and a loyal alumni base.

I deeply believe in the mission of universities. Universities are places that can transform lives, just like my mine. To come from a working-class community as a first-generation college graduate, to attending and then teaching at some of the best universities in the world, and now rising to the highest levels at Rice, is a powerful statement about the importance and relevance of universities in today’s society as places of opportunity that enable changing the world for the better.

As Nelson Mandela so eloquently put it, “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

I believe it is also the most powerful weapon to change lives. We will keep this central in our minds as we develop our vision for the University.

My appointment here has been characterized in the media as historic in that I am the first Black individual, first immigrant, and first engineer to become President of Rice. And while those are distinguishing characteristics of which I am very proud, they are not what define me. In fact, what defines me are those same attributes that I see in every student, staff, faculty member and alumnus connected to this university.

Many of the characteristics that I either inherited or learned from my parents apply — hard work, perseverance, humility, gratitude and respect for others. But there are other values that I hope define me, and that I share with those who walk with me on these sidewalks every day. Values that we will keep near and dear to us as we embark on this journey.

**SECTION III. CURIOSITY, EXCELLENCE & COURAGE**

These are curiosity and courage — grounded in nothing less than excellence in all we do. I firmly believe these values are instrumental in our trajectory of recognition and unconditional acceptance as a premier university on a global scale.

Curiosity is intertwined in the very definition of why we are here. As students and academics, we seek and advance knowledge to expand frontiers. We research new solutions with the goal of transforming ideas into action so that, as one of my predecessors, George Rupp, stated, “we can make contributions to broaden society.”

Curiosity is at the very core of why we as a university exist. That will not change as we move forward.

We must commit to excellence in all we endeavor at Rice University. Any undertaking we attempt must require our very best effort. When we compete for research awards and grants, we need to assume they will be awarded to us – no matter the level of competition. Our exceptional music students, for example, need to anticipate recognition at the highest levels of every competition. And our student athletes should not only be competitive, but envision national rankings. In any initiative we put forth — and we will not be able to do everything — our efforts will be guided and rewarded based on unparalleled excellence.

Striving for excellence takes diligence and intentionality. As Aristotle wrote, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, therefore, is not an act but a habit.” We at Rice are committed to making excellence an ingrained habit that we repeat, over and over and over again.

Rice University is at an inflection point in a new era of change that —like never before — demands courage. Former President Gillis characterized Rice as “a place for ideas, for free and vigorous discussion of ideas.” And that, my friends, is why we need courage.

As we move forward, we must value and commit to the courage of our convictions. The courage to grow and evolve. The courage to take risks. The courage to stand up for what is right and just. And the courage to make hard decisions that may not be popular or easy but are necessary to realize our ambitions.

It is not lost on me that 60 years ago on this very campus, President Kennedy in announcing the country’s intent to go the moon said, “We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills.” In that same speech he also referred to William Bradford who said in 1630 of the founding of the Plymouth Bay Colony that “all great and honorable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and both must be enterprised and overcome with answerable courage.”

My intent is not to imply the future of Rice will be overly marked by insurmountable difficulties. Rather, that courage in all things — great and small — is a virtue we will value and celebrate on this campus in new and relevant ways.

**SECTION IV: VISION**

During the past few months, I’ve met with countless students, alumni, faculty, staff, donors and civic leaders to help me understand how to courageously evolve this university. Where we are headed is not my singular vision, but based on what I know from my own experience at Rice as a former Dean and Provost combined with conversations with numerous members of the Rice community.

While still evolving, our direction is clear.

In the coming years, Rice will significantly increase its visibility and impact as a premier research university. We will have graduate programs of the same distinction as our undergraduate programs, all while strengthening what Rice is well known for – an unparalleled undergraduate education. This university will be grounded in all we do by the values of diversity, equity and inclusion, a place known for its culture of care, tolerance and understanding.

The foundation already has been laid. This journey has begun and we only need the creativity and courage we hold in our hearts, and an unwavering commitment to excellence to take Rice to the next level.

The original vision of our founders was that this institution would be a full range University with undergraduate, graduate and professional schools. Dr. Lovett, our first President, had bold ambitions for Rice as a premier research university, noting that “Faculty must be involved in research because the best person to lead the learner from the unknown to the known is the individual who is continually leading him or herself from the unknown to the known. He further stated that “The privileges of research are necessarily related to the pleasures of learning”.

It is in this vein that we recommit ourselves to the importance of research, scholarship and creative works in transforming our city and the world.

These activities will be characterized by their interdisciplinary nature, the quality and caliber of the endeavor and, most importantly, their potential impact.

When a cure for some of the most pressing neurological diseases, like Alzheimer’s, is found, it will be our engineers and scientists working with the clinicians in the Texas Medical Center who unlock the mysteries of the brain – all while working with our humanists to ensure that these cures are used for good.

Rice will be central in developing knowledge, technologies, and business models in energy, working with local companies to make energy cleaner and to accelerate the transition to renewable energy. Our research will help solve the most pressing global environmental challenges facing the human race while making sure all communities are positively impacted.

We will be partners in our great city while we study and provide innovative solutions for how Houston, the most diverse city in the country, can continue to grow and prosper in a resilient manner where all citizens have access to proper healthcare, education, and housing.

Of course, the common thread running throughout all of our research and scholarship is the holistic approach we take as a liberal arts institution. Scholarship stemming from the arts & humanities is critical to how we think about society. The humanities are central to our work here because they allow us to explore and better understand our culture and where we are headed as a society. Arts & humanities are the framework from which we build collaborations and initiate meaningful solutions, and we will support these studies as we endeavor, above all else, to train all of our students as humanists.

To accomplish our ambitions in research, scholarship and creativity, we must look to the foundation of any great University, which is its faculty. We will hire the best academics, and have the courage to settle for nothing less than excellence as we hire over 200 faculty across the breadth of the University in the next 5 years. In addition to excellence in their fields, they will bring an unbridled curiosity and a collaborative spirit.

Working seamlessly across silos and disciplines is essential in achieving our goals. Even more so because while we will grow, we will remain the small, private institution on which we’ve built our reputation. Our size demands that we collaborate seamlessly across disciplines to leverage our resources to the best of our abilities.

We will invest in our infrastructure — in terms of people, physical space and technologies — to ensure an alignment with our ambitions in research and scholarship. Facilities that mirror their disciplines such as the Brockman Hall for Opera, the Ralph O’Connor Building of for Engineering and Science and William T. Cannady Hall serving the School of Architecture will continue to be built.

All the while we will make what I believe is the best undergraduate education in the country even better. We will re-imagine our general education curriculum for the first time in nearly 20 years, ensuring that our students are prepared to solve the problems of the future with instruction that guides analytical thinking in context of history, culture and politics. We will continue to add new undergraduate majors and minors that align with student interests and global challenges, like our recently launched undergraduate business major and our new minor in environmental studies.

We will enhance opportunities for study abroad by pursuing new partnerships globally, including newly established partnerships in France,India, Scotland and Argentina. And, we will continue to offer degree and continuing education programs tailored to our community’s needs both inside and outside the hedges.

Innovation and leadership will be core tenets for our students as evidenced, for example, in how we partner with Houston’s Innovation District and how our newly-created Office of Innovation takes shape. Collaborations will ensure that our students have the skills to create technologies and tools to transform our world.

As we recommit to research, undergraduate scholarship and creative works, we do this within the framework of diversity and inclusivity that runs parallel to our own unique culture of tolerance, civility and open dialogue. This is possible because our student body is a multi-cultural reflection of the world at large. This class of 2026 has no single ethnic or racial majority, with 32% from underrepresented minority groups.

And I’m not just talking about demographics. The strength of our student population is in its array and depth of interests, talent, athletic abilities, leadership skills and personalities to create our culture. The diversity of our students and the breadth of support they receive at Rice are some of our greatest assets. Diversity at Rice is not just tolerated, it is celebrated as a strength of our great institution.

Innovative approaches to increasing diversity and reducing discrimination, along with efforts to create compassionate and caring global citizens, will be at the core of all that we do. Making new discoveries about our past will be one of our top endeavors to better understand the challenges we must tackle to create a better future for us all.

In complex times such as these, student support, including health and mental well-being services, Rice’s residential college system and safety and security initiatives will be reinforced to uphold our exceptional sense of family and belonging.

**SECTION V: CLOSE**

Is our roadmap for the future ambitious? Of course. Can Rice significantly increase its visibility and impact as a premier research university? For sure. Can we have graduate programs of the same distinction as our undergraduate programs, all while strengthening what Rice is well known for – an unparalleled undergraduate education? Absolutely.

It will require us to have the courage to take risks, the courage to push the envelope, the courage to make tough decisions, and the courage to change. Yes, we will change.

While our ambitions require us to evolve, there is one thing that cannot change, and that is the unique culture of care we have at Rice. The way we treat people with respect and dignity is paramount.

I am reminded of one of my favorite quotes from Maya Angelou on leadership and dealing with people.

“I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

We must remain a place where people never forget that at Rice they felt loved, welcomed, and special as they received an unparalleled education that enabled them to transform their own lives and the world around them.

For at this university we are dedicated to “no upper limits.” This is a place where the greatest problems of the world can and will be solved. It is in our DNA to go beyond the cusp of greatness to greatness itself. And, in John F. Kennedy’s words, we will “move forward with strength and courage.”

Thank you all of you for being here today. I am truly honored and excited to serve as the next President of this incredible institution.