

60th Anniversary of Dr. Wendell Gunn's 1963 Entry to Florence State College
Remarks by President Ken Kitts
September 11, 2023

Good morning, everyone. I'm joined today by Dena, and together we want to thank you for coming out for this special event. We also want to extend our gratitude to the many individuals who have worked hard to organize this program. From the ranks of the Executive Council, Minnette Ellis has served as the central point of contact for this planning exercise. Please join me as we thank Minnette and her colleagues for a job well done.

We are gathered here to honor Dr. Wendell Gunn on the 60th anniversary of his matriculation at Florence State College. But it's important at the outset that we reflect on the fact that Wendell's enrollment had much broader implications as it brought about the desegregation of this institution.

The transition away from a discriminatory past was a milestone event in the history of UNA. It set in motion a transition to a modern and dynamic University that has done a much better job of living up to its ideals, and of welcoming students and faculty and staff from all backgrounds and walks of life. It's a transformation worth celebrating. Even as we do so, however, we want to acknowledge and respectfully honor the memory of the many individuals who were denied educational access here for far too long.

Now to Dr. Wendell Gunn, the man who brought about that long-overdue change on September 11, 1963. Many of you know the story about Wendell's interactions with President E. B. Norton when he first applied here.

As president, I feel a certain kinship with Dr. Norton and a deep respect for his values and for the skill with which he prepared this campus for change. Wendell will tell you that Dr. Norton was waiting on an applicant who could become the legal petitioner that would help him overturn state law. But what Dr. Norton did not know – and could not have known – is how lucky he was that the agent of change that eventually arrived on his doorstep was a young man from Tuscumbia named Wendell Gunn.

Simply put, Wendell was the ideal student. What makes a student ideal hasn't changed in the last sixty years. Today, as then, we want students who are here because they want to be here. We want students who value a college degree. We want students who have great academic ability, and who never lose their desire to learn.

We want students who understand that this University is their temporary home but will forever be their *alma mater*. We love students who turn into successful alumni; who through their accomplishments bring luster to the reputation of the institution. Finally, we love alumni who remember those who helped them along the way and who give back to their *alma mater*.

Ladies and gentlemen, I just described Dr. Wendell Gunn. Now Wendell is quick to point out that he didn't come here to change the world. He just wanted a good education. But in so doing he unwittingly became the protagonist in the story of how Alabama's oldest university desegregated without the disruption and violence that occurred elsewhere.

As with any good drama, Wendell had a strong supporting cast around him. There were his parents, Marshall and Mattie Gunn, who raised remarkable children with the heart to succeed and the toughness to rise to challenges. There was Fred Gray, the brilliant civil rights attorney, who used his knowledge of the law to change a country -- and along the way he changed a small college in the Shoals of Alabama.

There was H. H. Grooms, the distinguished federal judge who wrote the order that allowed for Wendell's entry here and who became the judicial face of desegregation across Alabama. And there was our own Dr. E. B. Norton, a president who knew that his campus needed to change and loved it enough to make that happen.

It's hard to find the words to do justice to these many contributions. I'm reminded of President Abraham Lincoln. In dedicating the National Cemetery at Gettysburg, he said: "The world will little note...what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here."

And so, we gather here this morning on the very ground that Wendell walked sixty years ago today. He had the courage and the determination to go up those steps and into that building. Those same attributes saw him through to graduation from Florence State College, then on to a remarkable career that took him to corporate boardrooms and eventually to the White House. And finally, of course, there was his return home to UNA when Governor Kay Ivey appointed him to sit on the Board of Trustees for the institution he had changed forever.

What a journey, both for Dr. Gunn and for the University of North Alabama! *Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to understand that there is no story like this anywhere else in American higher education.* It is unique, it is profound, and it is beautiful. And we are honored to do our part today to ensure that it is remembered.

Thank you once again for being here today, and thank you for your attention. I ask that you join me now in welcoming to the podium Mr. Will Trapp, President Pro Tempore of the UNA Board of Trustees.