

Investiture Address
Dr. Ken Kitts ~ August 28, 2015
University of North Alabama

Members of the platform party, trustees, distinguished guests, delegates, and UNA faculty, staff, students, and alumni: it is difficult to find words to adequately express my gratitude for your role in helping to commemorate this special day in my life, and in the life of the University of North Alabama. It is an honor to have all of you here today.

I appreciate the many greetings and well-wishes that have been offered this afternoon. And, I appreciate the effort that many of you put forth to be here, in some cases traveling significant distances. I am especially appreciative of the delegates here today from our sister institutions, both within Alabama and beyond. They represent their own fine colleges and universities, and their presence underscores the importance of tradition in academic life. Within that group are many dear friends with whom I worked at Francis Marion University or the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. It's great to see you here today.

Also helping me celebrate this occasion are family members and friends I've known since childhood. There are parents, in-laws, grandparents, cousins, high school buddies, and siblings in the audience. All here with the purest of motives ... and then there's my brother Hugh. You see, Hugh is my older brother, with all the psychological baggage that comes with that, and I'm pretty sure he made the trip from Virginia to Alabama just to confirm that I'm really a university president.

The names of the Investiture Committee are printed in your program. This committee, chaired so ably by Ms. Celia Reynolds, spent many hours planning this event and related activities. As planning gave way to implementation, the committee began to work with faculty and staff from across the university to produce this event. Ms. Brenda Baker, Ms. Regina Sherrill, and Dr. Jeffrey Bibbee deserve a special mention for the many hours they have devoted to planning this investiture. It's been an expansive and labor intensive effort – and to be honest, it's a little unsettling to be the one at the center of all this attention.

From the start, I asked the planning committee to ensure that this event would be a celebration of the institution and not the individual, to the greatest extent possible. My name might be the one featured in the program today, but in reality I can't do much by myself. But when the talent on this campus is coordinated and motivated, we can move mountains.

That's true of most good things in life. They are a function of collective efforts. That point was drilled into me from an early age by my incredible parents, Warren and Betty Kitts, who exemplified the work ethic and wisdom of the Greatest Generation. Our home was a home of values: work hard, be honest, cooperate, treat others well, and protect that good name. Dad is gone, but we still have my mother, and she's here today. Thank you so much, Mom. Even when you thought we weren't listening, we were.

Continuing with this theme of collaboration, I now want to recognize three very important people who are the center of my universe. They make up the rest of Team Kitts at the University of North Alabama: my beautiful wife and partner in all things, Dena, and our two sons, Colin and Corbin. I love you, and I thank you for being willing to pull up stakes in the Carolinas and move ten hours away because of your faith in me. Please stand and be recognized.

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Those of you who know me well know that I love history. So I keep coming back to this distinction of being the twentieth president in this institution's lineage. That's a lot of history! The first president of what was then known as LaGrange College was the Reverend Robert Paine who hailed, interestingly enough, from North Carolina. Rev. Paine was a skilled administrator, and I appreciate his work in setting a good precedent so another Tar Heel transplant could follow in his footsteps 185 years later.

The first classes were held at LaGrange College on January 11, 1830. To put that date in context, James Madison, the father of the U.S. Constitution, was still alive when we opened our doors. By the time of the Civil War, the campus had moved to its current location here in Florence, and these grounds were home to significant troop movements as the city traded hands repeatedly during the war. Famous generals from both sides lived and made headquarters in buildings that loom large in the modern day operations of the university.

The last century saw steady growth and the emergence of one of the most beautiful campuses in the Southeast. Successive presidents, including my predecessor Dr. Bill Cale, were outstanding stewards of place, giving careful thought at every turn to ensure continuity with the original campus plan as designed by the Olmsted Brothers. It is a cherished legacy that I have inherited, and know that I take seriously my obligation to continue the harmonious development of people, programs, and place at UNA.

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In addition to being a student of history, I'm also a very deliberative person. I arrived here in March stating plainly my intent to get to know this University, its people, and its environs before trying to set out a plan

for the future. To date my journeys have carried me all over this campus, and from cookouts in Cherokee to tours of industrial sites in Huntsville; from meetings with local officials to stops in legislative offices in Montgomery; from witnessing a moving performance at Ivy Green to stepping onto the hallowed ground of the famous music recording studios just across the river.

Last year, when Dena and I talked about my possible transition to a presidency, we agreed that we would make a family move only if we could find a place that we could embrace, and that would embrace us back. We found it here. The people of Florence and the wider Shoals community have welcomed us with a warmth and hospitality that is unusual even by the standards of the ever-courteous South. But as genuine as this sentiment is, we understand that it is also a reflection of the love that the people here have for the University of North Alabama. Perhaps it's the age of the institution, perhaps it's the beauty of the campus. Whatever "it" is, there is an affinity here for this university that is magical.

We treasure that magic. The bond between UNA and the people of the Shoals is something to be celebrated and protected. But universities cannot be all things to all people. And so we need to begin organizing ourselves around some broad themes from which can flow more specific goals and action plans. The process of identifying those themes is still underway, but I don't want to let this moment pass without speaking from the heart about a few priorities that seem rather obvious to me.

First, let us commit to **Celebrate the Shoals**. UNA is blessed to be situated in a region known for its natural beauty, outdoor opportunities, and rich cultural heritage. We have to tap into that. Our locational advantage here is not hard to identify. The Mississippi River might be America's most literary river, but the Tennessee River is surely its most soulful. And the music that sprang up on its banks – right here – quite literally rewrote the American songbook and continues to make its influence felt today. That, my friends, is something we have to honor, and nurture, and promote. It's good for the region, and it's good for the university.

But celebrating the Shoals can take other forms as well. It means strengthening the special relationship that exists between UNA and the City of Florence. We want to contribute to the vitality of this amazing community. Celebrate the Shoals also means getting across the river in a meaningful way and engaging with the citizens of Sheffield, Tuscumbia, and Muscle Shoals. We must send a loud and clear message that we understand what it means to be a regional university. For all of these reasons, I call upon my faculty and staff colleagues to find ways to use the university as a platform to showcase the unique cultural and natural assets of the Shoals region. It is our geographic birthright.

Second, let us commit to **Provide an Extraordinary Experience for our Students**. To be clear, I believe we are in fact doing that now. But in the rapidly changing world of the early 21st century, we have to check ourselves constantly to ensure that we remain on the cutting edge of delivering a high-quality, personalized education that will open the right doors for our graduates. We must be sensitive to the needs of the business community in north Alabama as well as our educational partners in K-12 and at Northwest Shoals. That's a difficult proposition when budgets are tight and political pressures are many. And note that I did not limit this commitment to traditional instruction. Everything we do here can be a learning experience for our students, so we want that experience to be extraordinary whether it's taking place in the classroom, through student life activities, in the community, or on the field of athletic competition. The landscape of public higher education has never been more crowded. And so I call upon my colleagues to find ways that we can differentiate ourselves. Find ways that we can be extraordinary.

Third, let us identify new and creative ways to **Tell the UNA Story**. Great universities need a great story to tell, and we have a great story at the University of North Alabama. Our story includes that 185 year history, and our beautiful campus, and, yes, those wonderful lions. But it certainly doesn't stop there. We have faculty here with international reputations in their disciplines. We have alumni who have risen to the top of their professions. We have unique and innovative degree programs. And we have students who are distinguishing themselves prior to graduation through their academic and athletic excellence. I've heard more than once since coming here that UNA is "the best kept secret in higher education." The comment is meant to be positive, and I appreciate the vote of confidence that what we're doing here is, in fact, very good. It is. But we can't keep it a secret. Our state funding will depend on letting our lawmakers know that we offer a wonderful return on the taxpayer's investment. Our success in recruiting a diverse and well-prepared group of students will depend on being able to craft a compelling narrative of the UNA difference. Our ability to raise the private dollars so desperately needed for scholarship support will depend upon an excellent communication flow with friends of the university. And so I call upon my colleagues to help us find our public voice and to capture that narrative.

I offer these themes as a starting point for discussion, as a way of organizing our thoughts as we begin to work on that roadmap for our future. We can and will identify other key themes along the way. But, for now, if we focus on Celebrating the Shoals, Providing our Students with an Extraordinary Experience, and Telling the UNA Story, we can take positive steps toward realizing our institutional potential.



By way of trying to bring some of this together, let's talk once again about our Lions. If you'll allow me one last newcomer observation, it is this: I know of no other public university in the country for which the mascot is more interwoven with daily life and campus culture.

Our athletic teams carry the name "Lions" onto the field of competition. Our performance groups play off the name with titles such as "The Lionettes," or "The Roar." We have facilities known as "The Mane Room," or "The Lion's Den." Our campus is dotted with amazing statuary of lions at play, lions standing guard, and yes, lions reading books. And we greet one another at alumni and spirit events with a simple but passionate Roar Lions! I watched with interest last year as interim President John Thornell would close his messages to campus with that same message: Roar Lions!

In short, this is a lion-crazy campus. And I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that for three decades now we have had live lion mascots living right here on campus – and right next door to the President's Home, no less.

Dena and I didn't know what to make of this lion culture at first. We stayed in the President's Home during our interview last October. We arrived late one afternoon, and Leo offered a very special welcome to us about 5:00am the next morning. I'll never forget the first time I heard that low rumble – absolutely unique in its volume and tonal quality. And since that time, courtesy of the Lion Crew, we have been allowed backstage to tour the area where the lions are kept overnight. If you've never been in an enclosed space when Leo cuts loose with a roar, or Una stares right through you, you haven't lived. To say it's impressive is an understatement.

So we've caught the fever. We are now part of the Lion Mania at UNA, and yes, we've become very fond and very protective of our next door neighbors. When the Investiture Planning Committee approached us about a theme for this event, we considered many options before happening upon a phrase as simple and accessible as it is powerful: "Our Time to ROAR."

There is an energy on this campus that is palpable. Our momentum is very good. Going forward, we'll need to be smart about the decisions we make in order to maintain that momentum. But if we get it right – and we will, working together – then the sky will be the limit for the University of North Alabama.

This is our time to ROAR.

- So let us ROAR when we tell the UNA story.
- Let us ROAR as we celebrate 185 years of educational excellence.
- Let us ROAR when we trumpet the successes of our faculty, staff, students, and alumni.

- Let us ROAR as our student athletes build on the championship tradition at UNA.
- Let us ROAR as we wear purple and gold proudly.

In short, let us ROAR early and often, across the Tennessee Valley, from the Shoals to the Gulf Coast and wherever the UNA faithful might gather!

Ladies and gentlemen, I am honored to be here and proud to stand before you today as the twentieth president of the University of North Alabama. I believe in this institution, its people, and the region we serve. Thank you for the opportunity to serve this wonderful university ... and, of course, ROAR LIONS!