



THE INAUGURATION SPEECH BY MARVIN KRISLOV FOURTEENTH PRESIDENT OF OBERLIN COLLEGE

Presented on Friday, November 2, 2007, at the Inaugural Ceremony

Representative Kaptur, Lieutenant Governor Fisher, Presidents Coleman, Cole, and Dye, Mr. Lemle, distinguished trustees, faculty, staff, students, alumni, fellow citizens and friends of our Oberlin community, I'm deeply honored to have been selected to be president of Oberlin College, and to be speaking to you here today.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in a family where both my parents were the first generation to attend college, a family where the primacy of education was emphasized daily. I am sad that my parents are not alive to share this day, but I do want to pay tribute to Joseph Krislov and Evelyn Moreida Krislov. My father was an academic, a labor economist and arbitrator, my mother an activist and social worker. Both grew up in Cleveland, and they told me I should go to Oberlin. Now I have.

I'd also like to acknowledge my family, especially my wife, Dr. Amy Ruth Sheon, my partner in all I do, and our three wonderful children, Zachary, Jesse and Evie Rose, who also teach me so much and make our lives so full and fun.

You are likely all aware that today's ceremony began at 4:35, a slightly unusual starting time for such an event. There is a good reason for that. When the inauguration team first talked about plans for today, I thought we could start around 2:00 to enable some out-of-town delegates and friends to make it a day trip. I was informed 2:00 was too early because of classes.

3:00? I inquired. The message came back, well, that's still probably too early.

3:30/4:00? We don't know....there are still some (not many, but some) classes taught at that time on Friday.

Discussions with key faculty and deans ensued....and the word came back: Classes would not be rescheduled, even for an inauguration, an event which has occurred only 13 times in Oberlin's history.

What to do? My colleagues considered and advised: 4:35. The last class ends at 4:30, so that will give our highly motivated and fleet-footed faculty and students time to reach the field house, robing en route. And here we are.

I thought the handling of this situation showed flexibility and sensitivity to faculty concerns. But when we discussed this later at our senior staff meeting, David Stull, the Dean of the Conservatory of Music, sternly reminded me that this time was indeed a concession because 4:30 onward is normally reserved for ensemble rehearsals and athletics practices. Music is, of course, a pillar of Oberlin, and this field house is named after John Heisman, the legendary Oberlin coach whose football teams defeated both Ohio State and Michigan. I doubt the Buckeyes or the Wolverines will give us a rematch any time soon, but I'm happy to report Oberlin athletics are on the rise.

Through this iterative process of searching for an inauguration time, I learned one of my first lessons about Oberlin College. Education and academic excellence always take precedence.

That encounter, combined with other experiences I've had since arriving here, has emboldened me to answer the question Kemper Fullerton posed in an important address he gave in January, 1926, to Oberlin College's Social Science Club. Professor Fullerton chaired the Department of Old Testament Language and Literature at the then-Oberlin Theological Seminary and was by all accounts a great teacher, social activist and internationalist. His question was, Oberlin: College or Cause?



Today, one can answer emphatically that Oberlin is first and foremost a college and a conservatory. It is an institution where the pursuit of academic and artistic excellence prevails, where the library usually attracts more people on Saturday nights than any other spot, where faculty dedicate themselves to ground-breaking research and superb teaching, and where students strive to take intellectual risks and break down disciplinary barriers. Every day, my appreciation for the vitality and remarkable history of Oberlin College and the Conservatory of Music grows, as does my esteem for our accomplished faculty, students and graduates.

In his speech, Professor Fullerton acknowledged the importance of certain enduring commitments and values, which he viewed as part of Oberlin's cause. He traced them to Oberlin's founding in 1833 by a minister and a missionary, Reverend John Jay Shipherd and Philo P. Stewart. Full of missionary ambitions, they created a church-centered community dedicated to glorifying God and doing good deeds on what was then America's frontier. The "collegiate institute," as it was originally called, was established to train Christian teachers and preachers. Town and school were named for John Frederic Oberlin, an internationally renowned educational innovator. Pastor Oberlin campaigned against poverty and ignorance in society, created the first kindergarten and was the first educator to train and employ female teachers.

The goals of Oberlin's founders were lofty, their methods innovative. Inspired by the utopian enthusiasm that swept America in the decades before the Civil War, they aimed to perfect humankind through higher education. Pursuing that vision, they radically changed education in several ways.

Their first innovation was the introduction of manual labor as an integral part of the learning process. Every student was expected to put in four hours of physical labor daily. Hence our motto: learning and labor. That requirement vanished within a few years because students preferred to stop and discuss matters of the mind when they were supposed to be chopping wood or hoeing corn.

Our students today still work extremely hard studying, participating in extra-curricular activities, and performing various jobs. Some still till the soil at the George Jones Memorial Farm, a sustainable agriculture project we pursue in partnership with the local community. Many more put learning and labor into practice through community service under our Bonner Scholars Program. The same spirit animates life in our system of cooperative student residences established in 1950. More than 600 students currently live, dine or work in the co-ops.

Oberlin's next great innovations--the decisions to educate young women alongside men and to open the college's doors to African-American students--transformed American higher education forever. Under the leadership of Asa Mahan, our first president, and Charles Grandison Finney, the great revivalist and later our second president, Oberlin became in 1835 the first institution of higher education in America to adopt a policy to admit students of color. In 1841, we became the first college to award bachelor's degrees to women in a coeducational program.

Admitting women and persons of color did not instantly eliminate sexist and racist attitudes and practices in Oberlin or the broader society. It was, however, a crucial first step advancing Oberlin's belief in the life-transforming power of liberal arts education.

That is what happens here, in our Oberlin. Students' lives are illuminated by the knowledge they acquire and by Oberlin's spiritual heritage and values. Those values have evolved since 1833. We still produce teachers, theologians and orators as the remarks by Lieutenant Governor Fisher and President Cole attest. Now, they are of many faiths and beliefs and teach all manner of courses at schools, colleges and universities around the world. And our graduates continue to learn. According to the National Science Foundation, Oberlinians earn more PhDs than graduates of any other baccalaureate college. More than a quarter of our graduates' doctorates come in the hard sciences.



Yes, our Oberlin is first and foremost a college, shaped by what Professor of History Geoffrey Blodgett called a distinctive “mix of driving scholarly ambition and stubborn moral idealism.” Our idealism today embraces the values of creativity, innovation, leadership and community. These are not amorphous ideals to which we pay lip service at inaugurations and commencements. We live our values. They form the foundation on which Oberlin stands.

To observe these values, let us take a walk around town, beginning at the Underground Railroad Monument in front of Talcott Hall. Five different Underground Railroad routes converged in this town. That history inspired Cameron Armstrong to create the monument in 1977 as a senior art project. This stretch of full-sized railroad track, protruding from the ground at a 15-degree angle, was supposed to be dismantled when he graduated. Instead, Armstrong advocated fiercely for it to stand. It remains because one fearless student convinced our community to keep his memorial to the Oberlin faculty, students and townspeople, of all races, who worked together to ensure runaway slaves safe passage to freedom.

One of the leaders in Oberlin of the “fight for black freedom,” was John Mercer Langston. During the Underground Railroad era, Langston earned two Oberlin diplomas, an undergraduate degree in 1849, and a theology degree in 1852. Denied admission to law school because of his race, Langston studied privately and passed the bar in 1854. He was Ohio’s first black lawyer and is thought to have become the first African-American public official in the United States when selected as Brownhelm Township clerk. In the late 1850s, he managed Oberlin’s schools and later served as founding secretary of the Oberlin Board of Education. Today, Langston Middle School bears his name.

Langston organized Howard University’s Law Department in 1868, making its hallmark race and gender diversity. He went on to serve as U.S. consul-general in Haiti, and as the first African-American elected to Congress from Virginia.

From Talcott, we’ll cross the square and go to Vine Street and the park named in memory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Here another reminder of Oberlin’s historic commitment to social justice is located: the Wellington Rescue Monument. It commemorates the actions in 1858 of a group of 20 Oberlinians—local citizens, students and professors—who rescued John Price, a fugitive slave who had been abducted by Kentucky slave-catchers and taken to a Wellington hotel. The rescuers were jailed for violating the Fugitive Slave Law. Their trial received nationwide attention and helped turn the North against slavery. The Wellington rescue led to the popular perception of Oberlin as an engine of social change. For that, historian Nat Brandt has called Oberlin, “the town that started the Civil War.”

Oberlin’s commitment to education and social change soon reached across the continents. Inspired by Oberlin-trained missionary teachers in South Africa, John L. Dube, came here to study in 1888. Returning to his Natal homeland, he established the first Zulu-language newspaper and founded the Ohlange Institute, which emphasized learning and labor, and was one of the first secondary schools set up by an indigenous African for Africans. Dube went on to become the founding president of the African National Congress or ANC.

Nearly fifty years later, the ANC, led by Nelson Mandela ended apartheid and became the dominant political party in South Africa through free, democratic elections. Several years ago, I visited South Africa and toured Robben Island, where Mandela and other ANC leaders were imprisoned for decades. I learned Mandela and the other prisoners, inspired by Dube, so relentlessly educated themselves and even their white warders that the prison became known as “Robben Island University.”

Dube passed away in 1946. Yet his spirit lives on in the new South Africa. When Nelson Mandela voted in the first all-race election in 1994, he did so in a polling booth set up facing John Dube’s grave at Ohlange. Casting his ballot, Mandela said, “Mr. President, I have come to report to you that South Africa is today free.”



John Mercer Langston and John L. Dube were leaders, innovators and idealists. Their lives illustrate Oberlin's long history of commitment to internationalism, to increasing understanding between the world's communities. It began in 1847, when Sarah Margru Kinson, born in West Africa's Mandingo country and later a captive on the famed ship *Amistad*, became Oberlin's first international student. In his speech, Professor Fullerton called upon the Oberlin of 1926 to further develop its interest in the world's cultures and peoples. We can see today that it has.

If we walk back across Tappan Square toward Peters Hall, we can't miss the Shansi Memorial Arch, the only monument standing in this space we share with the Oberlin community. The Arch was dedicated in 1903 to the memory of Oberlin-connected missionaries who died in China during the Boxer Rebellion. In that struggle, hundreds of foreigners and tens of thousands of Chinese were killed, many of them in Shanxi Province.

The Arch is a landmark of our Oberlin and a complex symbol of Oberlin's efforts to engage with the wider world. Members of our community disagree about the meaning of the Arch. To some, it commemorates American Imperialism and Christian missionaries' paternalistic efforts to supplant China's religious heritage. Motivated by that view, our senior class of 1994 had a plaque mounted on the Arch in memory of the rebellion's Chinese victims. To others, it evokes undergraduate memories and symbolizes historic Oberlin and the love the community felt for students killed serving what they believed to be a worthy cause. Others may find both views compelling. Such differences reflect healthy debate in Oberlin's diverse intellectual community. Accordingly, we treat the Arch not just as a symbol, but as a cultural studies teaching tool that can stimulate discussion and debate.

Today, Oberlin's bridge to Asia is the Oberlin Shansi Memorial Association, formed to continue the educational work in Shansi, China begun by the missionaries. Shansi will celebrate its centennial in 2008 and is one of the oldest educational exchange institutions in the United States. More recently, its programs have expanded to include India, Japan, and Indonesia.

Looking south from the Arch we see the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, where creativity, innovation and leadership are long-standing traditions. *The Washington Post* recently described the Conservatory as a national treasure. That assessment falls short. It is an international treasure. In our Oberlin, there are more than 500 concerts a year by students, faculty and visiting artists, giving us the opportunity to appreciate a vast range of superb live music. We share our music with the world through radio broadcasts and tours such as the Oberlin Orchestra's successful visit to Carnegie Hall and its five-city tour of China in December 2005. That trip calls to mind Huang Tzu, a 1926 grad who co-founded the Shanghai Conservatory.

Generations of our Conservatory graduates—educators, scholars, performers, composers and conductors-- have shaped the world's musical landscape. John Long Severance, class of 1885, established the Cleveland Orchestra and Severance Hall. In 1996, George Walker won the Pulitzer Prize for his composition *Lilacs*. Conductors Robert Spano and David Zinman are world-renowned, as are performers such as Denyce Graves and Jennifer Koh. Other graduates populate the world's major orchestras, opera companies and jazz ensembles. Just last night at Finney Chapel, Ben Jaffe, class of '93, and director of the Preservation Hall Jazz Band, credited Professors Wendell Logan and Peter Dominguez, with making him the musician he is today.

Ours is the oldest, continuously operating conservatory in the United States, and the only major music school linked with a leading liberal arts college. From the 19th century onward, Oberlin has been at the cutting edge of musical education in its broadest sense. We established the first full-time chair in Music History and Appreciation in the United States in 1898, and designed the country's first four-year course leading to a Bachelor of School Music degree in music education in 1921. More recently, the Conservatory introduced in 1958 the Suzuki Method of violin instruction to the United States. That innovation radically changed the way music is taught to children and has produced legions of accomplished young musicians.



If we walk to the northeast corner of Tappan Square, we behold another Oberlin treasure, the Allen Memorial Art Museum. Founded in 1917, the Allen is one of the top art museums on any campus in the world, housing a collection of 12,000 art works. Looking at it, we can see more than a great museum. We see classes gathered around paintings and sculpture, learning first-hand from teacher-scholars how to understand art and history. We see the bold spirit of the late Professor Ellen H. Johnson changing Oberlin and the art world by acquiring works from little-known contemporary artists who go on to greatness, and inspiring countless students to study, savor and live with art. “To Rent a Renoir, Enroll at Oberlin,” is how *The Wall Street Journal* summed up the art-rental program Professor Johnson established 67 years ago.

Behind the museum, in the art department’s studios, we see a new generation of student artists exploring and mastering a wide array of media. Oberlin’s irrepressible creativity extends throughout the college. Our creative writers, including Ishmael Beah, class of 2004, and poet Thylas Moss, a 1981 graduate and MacArthur Fellow, garner awards and rave reviews. In the social sciences, our teachers and students consistently excel. Among Oberlin’s prominent social science graduates are the late Willard van Orman Quine, class of 1930, one of the 20th century’s foremost philosophers, and Richard Haas, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, and 1973 graduate.

The far-reaching effects of an Oberlin education can also be contemplated looking at an art work in front of the museum--the Italian marble fountain dedicated to the memory of Katherine Wright Haskell. Katharine Wright was the only sister of aviation pioneers Orville and Wilbur Wright, and the first woman from their family to attend college. She graduated from Oberlin with a teaching degree in 1898. A few years later, she emerged as critical to the invention of the airplane, giving speeches and writing letters to raise funds for her brothers’ experiments. In time, the Wright Brothers, who never attended college, adopted Oberlin as their alma mater, leading to the establishment on North Professor Street of the Orville and Wilbur Wright Hall of Physics, now part of our Science Center.

Katharine Wright is part of a long line of distinguished women whose actions and ideas have spread Oberlin’s values. One of the first was Lucy Stone, the social reformer and leader of the women’s rights movement, who put herself through Oberlin, graduating in 1847. Among Stone’s many accomplishments here was organizing a women’s debating society. When college officials banned it on religious grounds, Stone arranged for the group to meet in secret in a private home. By the time Katherine Wright refined her speaking skills here, rhetorical training was standard. This line of strong, eloquent women who have shaped our Oberlin and the world’s Oberlin continues to this day. It includes luminaries such as the late Jewel Lafontant-Mankarious, the prominent Chicago attorney and civil rights activist, and Sister President Cole.

We can ponder the contributions of another Oberlin luminary if we walk south on Main Street, turn left on East College, pass the Shansi House and stop at number 64. In a woodshed behind this austere, brick house a young Oberlin graduate named Charles Martin Hall made history in 1886, when he invented a process for inexpensively producing aluminum, the most widely used metal of the modern era. Behind Hall’s watershed invention is a prototypical Oberlin tale of an undergraduate working closely with his teacher and mentor, in this case, Professor of Chemistry Frank Fanning Jewett, to discover a solution to a scientific problem.

Such collaborations take place every day in Oberlin’s state-of-the art Science Center. These efforts may not all result in monumental discoveries, although our students and teachers have earned many honors in almost every field of scientific endeavor. Three of our graduates have been awarded the Nobel Prize: Robert Millikan in physics, and Roger Sperry and Stanley Cohen in Medicine/Physiology. Physicist Ralf Hotchkiss, biologist Richard Lenski and atmospheric scientist Paul O. Wennberg have been named MacArthur Fellows. D. A. Henderson received the Presidential Medal of Freedom for heading the team that eradicated smallpox worldwide. Stuart Card was named a Franklin Institute Laureate in 2007, for his



contributions to computing. This legacy lives on. Our undergraduates today work directly on research with teacher-scholars, just as Charles Martin Hall did.

Hall was also a leader and a visionary. No single individual has done more to shape Oberlin College and the City of Oberlin. Hall Auditorium, to give but one example, is named after Hall's mother, Sophronia Brooks Hall. Our outstanding theater and dance department which has produced MacArthur Fellows Julie Taymor and Bill Irwin, has staged many productions there.

Hall's generosity is literally all around us. So is his foresight. Long before environmentalism was popular, Hall's love for Oberlin and the natural world gave Oberlin a green heart. And a one-million-dollar bequest in his will called for turning the town square into a space "free of buildings or structures, for college or other use, except such as may be purely ornamental." The last buildings standing on what is now Tappan Square were torn down in 1927, creating the 13-acre park all Oberlinians enjoy today.

Hall's passion laid the groundwork for Oberlin to become the leading center for environmental studies that it is today. If we walk to the Adam Joseph Lewis Center on Elm Street, we see how Oberlin addresses the challenges of climate change and sustainability. The Lewis Center stands as a self-sustaining structure of classrooms, laboratories and gardens. Through solar technology, it generates more electricity than it uses, and its "Living Machine" system recycles waste and water. It has been called a revolutionary building, a manifesto for ecological design.

Since its founding, Oberlin has been seeking solutions to the pressing social and political issues of the day. Just as abolitionism was the driving force in Oberlin's early years, and internationalism in Kemper Fullerton's day, environmentalism, for many, is the central calling of our time.

At Oberlin, we are determined to lead in environmental stewardship. This past December we became one of the first American colleges or universities to endorse the goal of climate neutrality, and we are working to reduce our carbon footprint from 50,000 tons per year to zero. Local products account for one-third of the food served in our dining halls. We host the first car-sharing program in Ohio. Student activity fees subsidize public transportation, and much of our electricity comes from green sources. These achievements prompted *Sierra* magazine, published by the Sierra Club, to rank us just last week as number one among America's top 10 coolest—meaning ecologically minded--schools.

In Oberlin, we live our commitments. When we break ground in the coming months on the Conservatory's new Phyllis Litoff Building, the future home of our powerhouse jazz studies program, we will be building the most environmentally advanced music building on any campus in the nation.

In a recent *New York Times* column, Thomas Friedman chastised today's college students for being too complacent, too online, and so quiet he dubbed them 'Generation Q.' Mr. Friedman, come to Oberlin. Come see and hear how our enduring values are practiced today. Come visit our Kosher-Halal Coop where Jewish and Muslim students break bread together and can form lasting friendships. Come see how college and con students pursue their entrepreneurial aspirations--whether artistic, social, environmental or business—in a new interdisciplinary initiative leading to real-world innovation. Come to the Conservatory and learn how faculty and students commission and create contemporary classical music and jazz that gets glowing reviews in his newspaper. Come meet students who are actively seeking solutions to the world's political, social and environmental problems. As Carl Rowan, the late, great syndicated columnist from our class of 1947 once said, "Oberlin graduates never stop believing that they can make the world a better place." That belief, born of a utopian vision of perfecting humanity, is as relevant today as ever.



In his fiery sermons, Reverend Finney would excoriate his congregants by name for what he saw as their sins of pride, which were sometimes merely minor home beautification projects he deemed wasteful. Our criticism today is more constructive. But we can be consistent with our ideals while also praising and celebrating Obies and our accomplishments. To paraphrase Rabbi Hillel, if we are not for Oberlin, who will be? And if not now, when?

We must also be able to speak frankly and civilly of the challenges we face. Like all liberal arts colleges we struggle with rising costs, manifold demands on resources, and attacks by critics who claim liberal education has lost its moral compass or become irrelevant in our warp-speed technological world.

Moreover, we must find ways to support our historic commitment to inclusion, which now extends not just to race and gender but to economic access for students from the United States and across the world. We must ensure that the transformative power of an Oberlin education remains available to qualified students from poor and working class families headed by parents who, like mine and many others, believe in the primacy of education and the value of hard work.

That responsibility is part of our legacy. This college, this conservatory and this town were built by people unafraid of daunting challenges. They sincerely believed they could make the world better and inspired young people to share and act upon that belief. Their legacy, as constant as the geometry of Tappan Square, is now entrusted to us.

What better place to end our walk together than Tappan Square? We've traversed it time and again this afternoon. It is the center of our Oberlin. In the square, we can meet our neighbors and friends from the City of Oberlin. From their beginnings, the college and the community have been inextricably intertwined. Neither can thrive without the other. In recent years, we have built partnerships with the community focused on strengthening public education. Since 2001, Oberlin College has been offering full-tuition scholarships to qualified graduates of Oberlin High School. Through a program called Words are Very Empowering, or WAVE, our students provide Oberlin children from kindergarten to 12th grade with supplemental instruction in reading, writing and mathematics. Our students also teach our elementary school's Spanish-language program. The Conservatory's Community Music School provides high-quality musical instruction to students of all ages and abilities. To extend this commitment to our public schools, we are reinvigorating our teacher education and training programs.

If Professor Fullerton were here today, he would undoubtedly agree that educational excellence still provides the critical core for the college. He would also see that the enduring values of Oberlin's past and present remain the driving forces of what he called Oberlin's "peculiar genius."

Against the timeless backdrop of Tappan Square, each of us can measure how we have changed. Many worlds can open between the day new students first see the square, the day they stand under its trees and lanterns celebrating their graduation, and the days they return here as alumni.

Today we celebrate many aspects of Oberlin--the college, the Conservatory, and the town. We celebrate the leadership, creativity and innovative drive of our faculty, students, staff and fellow citizens. We celebrate our enduring commitments to inclusion, to access, to international engagement, to sustainability, to transforming lives through education and hard work.

Today we celebrate the idealism of our founders, and rededicate ourselves to translating it into a vision for the future. And today we recommit ourselves to building that future....the future of our Oberlin and the world's Oberlin.