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## Changing of the Guard: Civic Virtue in 20th and 21st Century Grand Rapids, delivered for the Rotary Club on August 24, 1995

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**CHANGING OF THE GUARD: CIVIC VIRTUE  
IN 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY GRAND RAPIDS  
ROTARY CLUB  
AUGUST 24, 1995**

The person responsible for my speaking to you today is one of your members and our Director of Development at Grand Valley, Joyce Hecht. Joyce, in her persuasive way, insisted that I speak to Rotary. The reason she pushed me into this engagement, I am sure, is that she feared I, and my institution, would fade from your consciousness and since I represent your local state university, dependent on local support, that was intolerable to her, as well it should be. In the recent past whenever one of my presidential colleagues, Dieter Haenicke, Jim Duderstadt, Helen Popovich, and Peter McPherson addressed you, she would give me a full report and close with “I think it’s time for you to speak to Rotary.” So here I am.

Not that I am a stranger to this podium. The first time as a college student recently returned from Yugoslavia in the 1950’s, I addressed Rotary. But in my present position I came before this club about 25 years ago, in the days when Sam Greenwalt always led in singing, “God Bless America,” then took off. I never resented his leaving because I thought Sam had heard enough speeches in his life. Dave Hunting, for whom I had such high regard, always sat at a front table just to the right of the speaker. As I began my speech he closed his eyes and opened them again to the sound of polite applause as I sat down. When I became a member of the club, I noticed that this was Dave’s weekly habit. In subsequent addresses to the club, when his eyelids closed, it became for me a comfortable signal that it was time to begin, and a sign that all was well in Grand Rapids.

Today my topic is, “Changing of the Guard: Civic Virtue in 20th and 21st Century Grand Rapids.” I am going to talk about Grand Rapids. The title suggested itself to me when I heard about Steve Van Andel assuming the chairmanship at Amway, a position his father had held since the founding of the company. “The Changing of the Guard” at one of Grand Rapids’ largest companies was complete since Dick DeVos assumed his father’s mantle over a year ago. I began to think the inevitable baton passing from one generation to the next in our civic life is taking place. “Changing of the Guard” is inevitable; civic virtue is not.

When I arrived in Grand Rapids over twenty-six years ago, three people close to Grand Valley helped me learn the way of Grand Rapids and west Michigan. They were Bill Seidman, Dick, Gillett, and Bob Pew. Observing the impact each of them had on the community was to see civic virtue in practice. All of them were in their late forties, and had proven themselves as CEO's. Of course they devoted most of their time to building profit-making corporations. Of course the effort they gave to improving the community could directly or indirectly affect positively their enterprises. Yet, each of them had and still has an element of character that requires them to serve the common good because it is right, it is civilized, it is a duty. Successful enterprise and commitment to the common good is the foundation of civic virtue.

These men remind me of Pericles, the fifth century B.C. Athenian leader who held that civic virtue was the obligation all citizens had to care for the city they inherited and to pass it on to the next generation in better shape. All Athenian males swore an oath accepting this responsibility when they turned 17. There is no such oath-taking in Grand Rapids, but it appears to me that there has been for our city and region some commitment of heart and mind to civic improvement over the generations. There certainly was evidence of that in Dick, Bob, and Bill.

Pericles enjoined his fellow Athenians to "become the fond lovers of your city," and in doing so respect how much those who have gone before have given to make Athens great. And when her greatness becomes manifest to you, Pericles continued, "reflect that it was by courage and recognition of duty and the shunning of dishonor that men won that greatness." Athens of Pericles' day reflected the presence of civic virtue. Grand Rapids of our day does too.

I sat in Rich DeVos' office when he explained Amway's development and told me they had surpassed \$160,000,000 in sales. Fred Bell told me one afternoon during a Steelcase call that the office furniture business in west Michigan would reach \$500,000,000 in sales within three years. Jerry Haworth was the industrial arts teacher at Holland Junior High School when I attended there. Shortly after my return to west Michigan as Grand Valley's President, he told me that they had closed the year with \$30,000,000 in sales. I remember talking with Fred Meijer when he told me about his decision to buy a chain of supermarkets with stores in Ohio and New York, the beginning of expansion out of state, at the same time Meijers was growing in Michigan.

I mention these facts because civic virtue is in greatest evidence in a city and region when its enterprises are well run and expanding. These are twenty to twenty-five year old facts. The

sales figures for the businesses I have mentioned have increased in geometric proportions providing jobs, profits and opportunities for civic virtue to express itself. But the billion and near billion dollar companies are not the only story in town.

During the last serious recession when the upper midwest was referred to as the “rust belt,” the Grand Rapids region had a 3% increase in manufacturing jobs, one of the few in the nation to show an increase. The success stories of small and medium size businesses and industries is so numerous that I doubt that even the economic “hot spots” in the sunbelt have a much better record.

The economic ingredient of community building is available, and has been throughout the various stages of Grand Rapids development. The past 30 years have combined vision and financial capability about as well as any period in the city’s history, and it appears that the economic outlook is bright as the city and the region begin to depend on a new generation of people to determine the scope and quality of civic virtue. “The changing of the guard” in a city and region is not as precise as it is at the Queen’s Palace with a timetable adhered to rigidly. In a sense, generational change is a continuing process, yet it becomes obvious that change has taken place particularly when we focus on community leaders. The three who were my mentors still help, but each for his own reasons is not available as he once was. Others have taken the mantle, and the guard is changing.

How will we build our community? During the 12th and 13th centuries, Gothic cathedrals rose throughout Europe. But unlike the early churches, the great Gothic cathedrals were no longer isolated monasteries, constructed beyond the city walls. These places of worship were in the middle of town. This city-center location signified a major cultural change. Both the ecclesiastical and secular needs of people needed tending. The cathedrals were built where that had to happen. Cathedrals took centuries to complete, thereby laying claim to the civic virtue of several generations in and around their cities. To this day, cathedrals in many towns and cities throughout Europe have contributed to the maintenance of the center and a high quality of life and activity there.

In modern America, we have had more difficulty sustaining a high quality of life at the center of our cities. We have seen the consequences of that failure in our own state, and how long and hard the struggle is to recapture the center city. Where there has been success, and I think

Chicago can claim a degree of success, we can see the benefits. Our own city, Grand Rapids, made a renewed commitment to preserve strength in downtown when the centrifugal forces of modern day commerce became evident. It happened a generation ago. Maybe the freeways helped define it. The beginning of Vandenberg Plaza was a significant step. I was not here then, but I have watched it unfold as you have. There have been both successful and unsuccessful ventures, but the recognition that the center of the largest city in the region affects the lives of everyone in the region has never left the consciousness of the best political and financial leaders. This consciousness and this commitment must flow from one generation to another. We have no dominant cathedral to constantly remind us of our commitment to the center, so for us commitment must live in the minds and hearts of each generation and reveal itself in public and private works of such magnitude that there is never the threat of a “lost generation.”

Commitment is nurtured in common sense, city and regional pride, and the ability to visualize our city with a healthy center. Knowing that we must act to build the center, formulating plans to do it, and then pledging the resources to bring those plans to fruition is the expression of civic virtue.

Wherever civic virtue abounds, there is an increase in construction. Ideas and enclosed space are intertwined. **Idea:** increase economic activity; **building:** construct a convention center, hotels, and restaurants. **Idea:** improve quality of leisure life; **building:** an arena for sports and other entertainment, bring in a baseball team, and construct a stadium. **Idea:** offer people an opportunity to learn about and appreciate their heritage and the natural environment in which they live; **building:** construct a new improved museum and a botanical garden. **Idea:** make it possible to enjoy the arts; **building:** provide a performing arts center and art museum. **Idea:** provide people with an opportunity to prepare themselves professionally, and secure for the region a well educated work force; **building:** construct university facilities with classrooms, library, technological services, and research labs and equipment. The buildings are the places where the ideas become everyday realities. And they also become the symbols of the ideas, physical reminders of the value of the idea. It is powerful and works on our minds and emotions so subtly that we are usually unaware of how important the buildings and the architecture of those buildings are in shaping our feelings towards our surroundings, our work, people we meet in the buildings, and the city itself. What we build in our cities defines who we are.

If we are defined by what we build, the functions in our buildings will demonstrate to the nation who we are and what is important to us. The attention we give to creating beautiful buildings and unenclosed spaces, and sponsoring art and horticulture in public places shows our level of taste, but more than that, it reveals our understanding that beauty enhances the human spirit. So as Grand Rapids continues to recreate the core of the city, let flowers bloom, bells ring, sculptures rise, fountains bubble, and green spaces abound as we carry on public and private enterprise in attractive new and restored edifices.

I think a good case can be made that the late 1950's and the early 1960's saw an emerging vision for the city and the region. With broad public support galvanized by elected officials and private individuals who could visualize the future for downtown, investment and political action began to create what we now have in the center of the city. Many of the important players in those years of new beginning are gone, some are less active. New players entered the game in that period and picked up the pace. Jay Van Andel and Rich DeVos come to mind because of their transforming financial investments and gifts that began in the 1970's and continues today. And there were many others. Recently a group of younger people from businesses, foundations, public agencies and government have entered the game, joining some of the players who have been around for awhile. I like to think that the vision, commitment, and dynamic of those in past years is responsible for what is happening now. That the inspiration of the recent past is passed on to the younger talent that we see around us in the city and region, and as the guard gradually changes, the focus on building the center city will not.

A city builds in phases. Vandenberg Plaza's first buildings were a stage, the federal and state buildings another, then came the convention center and DeVos Hall. The hotel and the Ford Museum followed, there were several commercial buildings, Grand Valley's L.V. Eberhard Center and Grand Rapids Community College Tech Center. Recently the Van Andel Museum was completed. As a community, for the purpose of giving it a label, we are in the midst of the seventh phase since the vision began to materialize for downtown in the early 1960's. This phase is comprised of the arena, now emerging from the ground, the proposed convention center, and a significant expansion of Grand Valley's downtown campus. I can speak directly to the third of the important triumvirate of projects. The city university must be intertwined with the life of the citizens. No ivory tower here. Though there may be a place for an ivory tower somewhere, not

here. Many students will come from work to a class in business or engineering and then return to work in the morning. After doing that enough times, the student earns a degree, and the degree means that the whole educational process has been a combining of the theoretical with the practical because he or she has been involved in both at the same time.

A small business discovers that its product can sell in Asian markets, but no one in the company understands much about those markets or the indigenous languages. The CEO sends a team from the company to the university's International Trade Center for short courses on trade, culture and basic language skills so they will be better prepared to do business in those markets.

A company invites potential customers or partners from a foreign country to visit Grand Rapids. To give them an overview of west Michigan as a good place to do business, the guests are taken to the International Trade Center at the university to see exhibits, hear specially prepared talks and see a film on the subject.

A college student, forced for financial reasons to stay at home, completes his or her course at the community college. The same financial conditions prevail and the student seeks the least expensive college opportunity. The city university is the "best bet in town."

The area is growing. The business community, the health community, the public agencies are all expanding. They need people, educated people. They need opportunities for their own people to grow. They need research partners and they need information. They turn naturally to the university in the city.

The university in this city, part of the downtown core, is desperate for space - beautiful, functional space. If it does not receive it soon, the communities I have mentioned will become desperate for the services that kind of space can provide them. It is interesting to note that if provided the 275,000 square feet necessary to build space for a business school, an International Trade Center, a graduate school library, computer labs, classrooms, and student services, Grand Valley State University will still have the fewest square feet enclosed per student of all of Michigan's state universities. This is catch-up, not expansion.

This seventh phase comes at a time when a generation of people who saw the vision of those who initiated the new era in the late 50's and early 60's and made it their own are still involved. They are joined by a new guard of younger people who are demonstrating everyday that the vision is intact and they have the energy and intelligence to carry on.

Senator Bill Bradley wrote one of the best articles I have read this year: "America's Challenge - Revitalizing our National Community" in the National Civic Review. He laments the tunnel vision of both Republicans and Democrats. The Republicans denigrate government and expound only the free market. The Democrats look only to government for solutions to problems. He says, "What both Democrats and Republicans fail to see is that government and the market are not enough to make a civilization. There also must be a healthy, robust civic sector; a space in which the bonds of community can flourish. Government and the market are similar to two legs of a three legged stool. Without the third leg of civil society, the stool is not stable and cannot provide support for a vital America." What I am talking about is that third leg, the civic sector, the civil society, the place where citizens come together to form opinions and establish common values. They come together in churches, in clubs, in neighborhoods, in places of work, in social gatherings with friends. There the decisions of what to support and reject are formulated. Those are the places and situations from which civic virtue emanates. And when civic virtue begins to translate itself into buildings and the functions within the buildings, in our day it is usually the result of combining money raised by taxes through the government and gifts and grants from private sources that have made the free market work. It often takes the third leg, that I prefer to call civic virtue, to make the two legs of government and free market work in the best interest of all people. It is true for the arena. It will be true for the convention center and for Grand Valley. For Grand Valley I see 15 million private dollars and in the 40's of millions from the state. To achieve both goals we will need the support of citizens as private donors and as voters in the public sector, as people imbued with the concept of civic virtue seeking a civil society.

As I reflect on the center of the city and what it means for all of west Michigan, I am thankful for the thought, the care, and the wealth that has been expended on it. There is a poem by Allen Dromgoole entitled "The Bridge Builder" that illustrates what has happened in Grand Rapids. The term corny would be applied to it in my younger days, but it makes a point I want to make.

*An old man, going a lone highway,  
Came, at the evening, cold and gray,  
To a chasm, vast, and deep, and wide,  
Through which was flowing a sullen tide.*



*The old man crossed in the twilight dim,  
 The sullen stream had no fears for him;  
 But he turned, when safe on the other side,  
 And built a bridge to span the tide.  
 "Old man," said a fellow pilgrim, near,  
 "You are wasting strength with building here;  
 Your journey will end with the ending day;  
 You never again must pass this way;  
 You have crossed the chasm, deep and wide--  
 Why build you the bridge at the eventide?"*

*The builder lifted his old gray head:  
 "Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,  
 "There followeth after me today  
 A youth, whose feet must pass this way.  
 This chasm, that has been naught to me,  
 To that fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.  
 He, too, must cross in the twilight dim;  
 Good friend, I am building the bridge for HIM."*

There is no doubt a strong bridge is built from the past to the future for downtown Grand Rapids. To those who are younger than I, to sons and daughters of figurative and literal fathers and mothers, I hope you will cross the bridge, determined to build as ~~they have built~~ <sup>those who built it</sup>, or even better. As we are all admonished in the book of Galatians, "Let us not be weary in well doing; for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not."