Memorial for James "Jimmy" Walker, delivered on February 26, 2003

Arend D. Lubbers
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/presidential_speeches
Part of the Archival Science Commons, Education Commons, and the History Commons

Recommended Citation

This Speech is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Presidential Speeches by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Jimmy was a big man. He was a handsome big man. When I first met him that is what I thought. His physical appearance commanded attention and, like all those who with their impressive good looks attract the notice of others, had them attentive to what he had to say. He did not disappoint. When he and I first engaged I found the subjects we probed and the way he probed them at the same time, serious and pleasant. Like most colleagues on meeting, pleasantries were exchanged, but if there was anytime available to us, we moved swiftly beyond them. I always found a lot of meat on his intellectual bones, and it was on chance meetings during my campus wanderings that we had our best encounters.

One characteristic of our conversations that I remember was his controlled impatience, at least to me, of those practices and convoluted explanations in the name of process that frustrated people from moving from problem to solution. That is why, as I understand mentioned at his funeral service, he had no qualms about forging a signature to help a student attain a legitimate end. I confess I would have done the same, though I did not need to employ it since I had the privilege of accomplishing the same goal by
verbal or written order. He was the student’s friend, but not the student’s foil. I remember a time or two when he stood adamantly against what he perceived a student taking unjust advantage of him and the academic standards that he upheld. On such an occasion, the clash of wills resounded to the level where I would hear it. This was rare for he was really a student advocate and his students knew it and appreciated it.

Jimmy talked to me of his Arkansas background. Nothing dishonorable about being poor, black, from an Arkansas farm - something quite remarkable being born there and earning a Ph.D. and teaching at a university. Where did the spark come from that made him reach for a different environment - a father or mother, a teacher, an experience, an unexplainable inner voice? He may have told me, but I don’t remember. Some of you may know. Part of it has to be ambition, but neither his ambitions, nor his success was overlaid with ego that irritated or needed public stroking. He found the route to his future and did not lose his track. When I think of Jimmy, where he came from, and where he settled, I am convinced by conscious observation and deep feeling that he found his place and that he knew it.

He revealed himself to me when on one of my unexpected calls, I found myself in a small botanical garden; his office that he had transformed
with plants. He chuckled at my astonishment. This large formidable presence had an unexpected side. He liked flowers and plants. Maybe many of you knew that but I didn’t; I was surprised and pleased. It confirmed what I had suspected. Jimmy had an emotional underbelly of sensitivity and gentleness that was revealed by those numerous and well tended plants.

Imposing in physical aspect, learned in profession, possessed of a quality of gentleness, Jimmy was a person who drew others to him. A teacher draws people. They listen, they converse, they are influenced; they are forever better for it. That is the essence of Jimmy’s life amongst us at Grand Valley.

Over the past years I have participated in services of farewell and memorial for friends who taught or assumed other responsibilities at our university. Each time I come with certainty, gratitude and awe.

Certainly, because in reflecting on our lives, I see them as foundation stones of this university. The foundation comes first; there is nothing like it. And the final structure will be no greater than the foundation can sustain. Jimmy was early on here. He did his building and now his contribution to the foundation construction is complete. Because of what he did here, he will always be a part of what is done here even after his name will be forgotten – even as all of our names will be forgotten.
Gratitude today because Jimmy came here; because I had an opportunity to know him and be his colleague; to live in the time he lived. Grateful that he was a pioneer and foundation builder at our institution as we sought to be an inclusive place where judgments are made on merit not ethnicity or gender.

Awe at the process of life and death. Somewhere in the realm of numbers there is a fixed number of homosapiens who have lived and died. But we will never be able to find it, and it is almost like infinity to us. Yet here we are hovering around the campfire of our lives to give thanks for Jimmy’s life, one amongst a number we cannot count. Yet as we observed and interacted, we understood what this one life, Jimmy’s, did for people, his students, his friends, his family, his colleagues, and his university. It is awesome what one life can be worth.

In his later years Jimmy fell on good fortune. He met and married Margaret. So long single, “Who’d a thunk it?” But they did, and it was a blessing in his life. Did you observe as I thought I did? That Jimmy’s temperament softened a little when he and Margaret joined? Of course, that may not be surprising because Margaret has that effect on most people with whom she works. I even notice it in myself when we are together. Being far removed from their personal lives, I was surprised when I learned about their
marriage. That romance had never entered my conjecture zone. But when I heard it, a little shot of joy pierced my heart. It was the kind of joy that comes when something wonderful happens to friends that you don’t expect.

An unhappier, unexpected event also happened that pierced our hearts with sadness – Jimmy’s passing. For a man so formidable in strength and physique, one does not expect a physical weakness, but it is in our nature to deny weakness. We are thus often taken unaware. Due to the suddenness of Jimmy’s death, I was unable to be present for his funeral. So this invitation to speak here, to Margaret, to friends, family, colleagues, and students is special for me because as I have tried to explain, I feel my life and his have their own intertwining characteristics. We played different positions on the same team. We had many of the same commitments, and often our spirits were joined in our university’s cause.
Celebration Processional ...........................................Voices of GVSU

Invocation ..................................................John DeBoer, Campus Minister

Welcome .............................................................James Bolger

Opening Comments ................................................President Mark Murray

We remember: Arend D. Lubbers, President Emeritus

‡ John Gracki, Associate VP for Academic Affairs

♂ Terry Fisk, Faculty Colleague

♀ Mike Mast, Faculty Colleague

公布了 Korin Spahr, Current Student

Music (“Wind Beneath My Wings”) ................... Cassonya Carter

Comments .............................................................Margaret Sellers Walker

Recessional ..........................................................Voices of GVSU

Refreshments are available in the lobby. Please join us in sharing your memories and celebrating Dr. James Walker’s life.

FEBRUARY 26, 2003
12:00 NOON
COOK-DEWITT CENTER
James G. (Billy) Walker was born January 14, 1947 in Altheimer, Arkansas and departed this life January 16, 2003. He was the son of the late Mr. And Mrs. James G. Walker, Sr., (Queen Ester Radney).

He confessed his belief in Christ at an early age in Gethsemane, Arkansas. As a member of New Hope Baptist Church he continued to practice his faith.

Jimmy received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 1975. He was also an alumnus of the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff with a Bachelor of Science Degree and Central Michigan University with a Master of Arts Degree in Education Administration. As a member of the U.S. Army, he served in the Infantry in Vietnam. During his tour of duty he received the National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal, Combat Infantry Badge, and the Sharpshooter Badge (Rifle).

As Associate Professor in the School of Criminal Justice, Grand Valley State University (GVSU), he taught courses in the Criminal Justice curriculum. Prior to joining the faculty at GVSU, Jimmy served as Director of Education and Treatment Programs at Ingham County Sheriff’s Department, Corrections Officer for the Federal Bureau of Prisons at Milan, MI and for the Genesee County Sheriff’s Department. Jimmy Walker’s passion was teaching CJ 101, introducing students to the history of crime and punishment. Continuing contacts from his many students serve as testimony to his ability to bring the subject matter to life for them as well as their respect for him as a professor. The University, at the 2002, fall convocation made official recognition of his 25 years of teaching. Jimmy also devoted time to community activities. He served on the board of Project Rehab, the Salvation Army Day Reporting Center, and as a member of the Citizens Alliance on Prisons and Public Safety.

Jimmy is survived by his wife, Margaret Sellers Walker, son; Bryan Jackson Walker, stepson; Benny Wesley, Wayland, MI, stepdaughters; Loren Sellers Jackson, Sharon Sellers Clark (Derek) and Lisa Wesley Jackson from Detroit, MI, his sister; Karen D. Walker, Chicago, II., brothers; Charley H. Walker (Linda), Huntsville, AL, Kenneth R. Walker, San Francisco, CA, and Glen W. Walker (Laverne), Gethsemane, AR. Others cherishing his memory are aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, cousins, grandchildren and a host of friends.