



Central State  
University

## **Charter Day Convocation Speech**

**Wilberforce, Ohio**

**March 6, 2007 - 11 AM**

**Nancy Wilson**

I am so honored to be chosen as your keynote speaker for this Charter Day convocation celebrating Central State University's 120<sup>th</sup> year – 120 years that have indeed been marked by a dedication both to service and excellence. I am also humbled by this honor because while I did matriculate here, I did not stay long enough to complete my studies to be a teacher. In 1959 I decided to follow my dreams and went to New York – but mind you, I had specific goals and I went with a plan AND a timetable. I wanted a recording contract with Capitol Records – that was home to Nat King Cole, Dakota Staton and Peggy Lee. I wanted John Levy to be my manager – he represented the best, handling the careers of George Shearing, Ahmad Jamal, and Cannonball Adderley to name a few. And I allowed myself just six months – if it didn't "happen" by then I'd come back to Central State and finish my degree.

There is much to be said for fate, and luck, and being in the right place at the right time, but there is even more to be said for being prepared -- being ready, willing and able to embrace the opportunities that come your way. And, I should add, being smart enough to recognize those opportunities.

I had been singing locally for awhile, and at the age of 15, having won a talent contest, I had my own television show called *Skyline Melodies* that was on the air for 15 minutes a week. That was in 1952. And with my local notoriety I was able to make friends with some of the nationally known artists when they came through town on tour. So when I arrived in New York I was well-prepared. I got a day job, used my connections with the musicians I had met, most notably Cannonball Adderley, and when I got my big break – to fill in for Irene Reid at The Blue Morocco – I was ready to call Mr. Levy. The rest is history. But keep in mind, while leaving school is not a decision that I regret, it is not one I would ever recommend, especially in today's world.

I did a little homework so that I could quote for you verbatim the mission at Central State. It is, and I quote, "to academically prepare students with diverse backgrounds and educational needs for leadership and service in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing

world.” The world **has** changed, and it is continuing to change at an ever-increasing pace. Believe me, I’m still out there and I know what it’s all about. But you are ready. You are prepared.

This university has fostered in you a quest for **academic excellence**, and having proven yourselves you have **earned** the title of Graduate. Now we are asking you, urging you, to maintain that spirit as you go forth into the world and to strive for **personal** excellence.

But how do you measure that? What yardstick will you use to evaluate your options? Here are two questions you might ask yourself: “Will this be a win-win situation benefiting others as well as myself? And “Will this help me to achieve my personal best?” If you cannot answer “yes” to both questions, start looking for some alternatives.

A moment ago I mentioned my manager, John Levy. He has been my manager for nearly 50 years now...without a written contract. He is not only a man of integrity, but he is one who truly understands the words service and excellence. Back in the day, before I even knew him, he was a noted bass player working on the famed 52<sup>nd</sup> street in New York. He played with some of the greatest names in jazz, including Billie Holiday, Ben Webster, and George Shearing. But he put down his instrument to become a personal manager so that he could use his expertise to be of service to other artists, to help **them** achieve **their** potential. John has a list of favorite sayings, but the two at the top of his list attest to his belief in the value of both service and excellence, values that I share wholeheartedly. Now I’m still a working girl, but I’d be a very wealthy woman if I had a dime for every time I’ve heard John say: “We are all put on this earthy for a reason, and that is to help each other” and “If I had to be a street sweeper I’d want to be the best damned street sweeper there ever was.”

Everyone has their own personal gauge for personal excellence. I can only tell you that it is **not** about the awards and accolades. Okay. Don’t misunderstand me. I **loved** winning my third Grammy award last month – and I’m tickled pink that the Central State University Chorus has twice been nominated for a Grammy – but those are just moments, fleeting moments. And those very seductive moments can be addictive. You have to remember, you must consciously remind yourself, that just like a drug-high, those moments do not last. It pains me to watch young people today achieve great fame or fortune very early in their careers only to find themselves adrift when tomorrow they have become old news. This happens often, and not only in the world of sports and entertainment; it happens in the business world as well. Bubbles burst in all fields.

So it would seem that longevity might be among the goals worthy of your consideration. I am certainly enjoying a long run, and I’m still going strong at the age of 70. How did I do it? To start with, I had clear priorities. For me, it was family first, then my career. I also realized how important it was to ally myself with people who understood and supported me in my choices. I was very lucky in that my music was the popular music of the time, so I achieved a high level of visibility very quickly. I had high hopes, but I honestly never dreamt that my record sales would surpassing those of such established stars as Nat "King" Cole, Peggy Lee and even the popular Beach Boys. I didn’t know that my name would appear often on Billboard’s pop, soul and jazz charts.

My popularity as a singer afforded me some wonderful opportunities. I was a guest actress on the top television programs and sang on the variety shows headlined by Carol Burnett and Dinah Shore. Then in 1974 NBC gave me my own weekly television show allowing me to become one of the first hosts to present Black entertainers, athletes and politicians in a talk-show format. We won an Emmy for that program and when the network dropped the show it was only because they needed that slot for Saturday Night Live. If we were second to them, then we must have been doing pretty well.

It was wonderful time, but I also saw much in the world that was not wonderful, and I felt that it was imperative that I speak out, use my voice, my position, my visibility. Of course I was not alone, and many came before me to light the way – Paul Robeson, for example. I am so pleased to be standing here in the Paul Robeson Cultural and Performing Arts Center. As I am sure you must know, he could communicate in more than a dozen languages, and he used his magnificent voice not only to entertain, but also to speak out against racial injustices, economic injustice, against injustices of all kinds.

In my fight against injustice I was privileged to march in Alabama with Dr. King and Andrew Young. [elaborate?] But service need not be synonymous with protest alone. Service is also about fighting for wellness and cures for disease, whether speaking out, raising funds, or toiling in a laboratory. Many years ago I partnered with Johnson & Johnson to promote the importance of neonatal care. I've also been active in the fight against breast cancer and heart disease. A few years ago I was privileged to deliver a speech at the United Nations about the scourge of AIDS, and tomorrow morning I will be on an airplane headed for Atlanta, not for a concert but for a meeting at the Center for Disease Control to discuss ways to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS in the African-American community. These are important issues, and there are so many battles to be fought, but if we also pitch in, using whatever our talents might be, we can make a difference.

Of course we all need some beauty and joy in our lives, so in that light the arts are a service too. In fact, there's another example right outside this very building. That sculpture out front – brought to you by my good friends Bill and Camille Cosby – represents yet another example of those who use their talents for the public good. These are people who believe in both service and excellence.

Another belief I share in common with the Cosbys is the importance of education. Every child deserves a proper education. I'm concerned about the fact that if you have money or if you live in the right neighborhood, you have a school where your children are exposed to computers. If you are not fortunate enough, your children get left behind. I'm concerned about the children. I'm concerned about education. I'm concerned about money being taken away from education. I want music back in the schools. I want schools open longer in the day. I want extra-curricular activities for children.

I know that you all worked hard to get here today, but you were also blessed in receiving a good education. This school's survival – 120 years – is evidence of the service and excellence provided not only by the faculty and staff, but also by each and every one of the ten presidents to date. I don't know them all, but I do remember Charles H. Wesley who was in charge when I was

a student here. Years later, in 1976 when I did benefit concerts to raise funds for rebuilding after the '74 tornado destroyed so much of our campus, I had the honor of meeting Dr Lionel H. Newsom. I was here again in 1994 and met Dr. Arthur E. Thomas, and just last night I met Pres. John W Garland and his wife Carolyn and heard about his Speed to Scale initiative.

You witnessed the completion of the first new academic building to be constructed on campus in **20 years**, and I understand that it is just phase one of a larger plan. I also learned that the Ohio Legislature recently passed a capital appropriations bill, and that phase two (breaking round for the Natural Science bldg) is about to begin [has just begun?] These are major achievements that could not have been realized without faith and hard work; achievements that could not have been realized without a profound and abiding love of service and a commitment to excellence.

Fundraising is hard work, but it is more necessary than ever as governments cut back their budget allocations for programs that you and I view as essential. Philanthropy is essential, and as you are just starting out, keep in mind that gifts of time and support can be just as valuable as cash. I have to tell you that of all the honors I have received – the plaques and statuettes and the Star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame – the ones that mean the most to me are the humanitarian awards: The Urban League's Whitney Young Award, the Paul Robeson Humanitarian Award, the Martin Luther King Trumpet of Conscience Award...Do you understand?

I mean these things sincerely, but it doesn't mean that you must lead totally selfless lives. I will admit to you that there are two events in my professional life might possibly have given me a bigger thrill than anything else, and they both took place in Ohio. One was the day Chillicothe Mayor Sulzer announced that they were naming a street after me – have you ever driven down Nancy Wilson Way? And the other was the day Central State's President Thomas awarded me an honorary doctorate degree. So take time for yourself, your family and your friends. And remember that there is no harm in enjoying the good things that come your way.

An interviewer once asked me what I saw as my best accomplishments. My answer was that I sang stories that people remembered, songs that touched people's hearts. I sang songs that had people naming babies after me, songs that were real. I sang songs that would move you. We had this relationship, my audience and I, where we trusted one another. My audience is the source of my longevity, but God set it all in motion. God gave me this gift, my voice. And I think He gave me enough sense to try to use the gift wisely, because it has sustained for close to 50 years. I have lost a couple of notes on top, but not many! I'm so grateful for the voice, and I thank God for it. And I shall try to continue to use it wisely.

My wish for all of you is that you use your talents wisely, stay mindful of the importance of service and the benefits of excellence, and live long and happy lives. Know yourself. Believe in yourself. Set your sights high; set your sights where you can accomplish them. You understand what I'm saying? Don't set your sights so high that you're going to be miserable. Reach for something that is attainable and while you are on your path, just be kind. Keep an open mind and an open heart. God speed.

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