

9-1-2010

A New Era

Jim Stewart
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim (2010) "A New Era," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 3 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol53/iss3/4>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.



Rod Smolla's wife, Michele, and family joined him on stage as he took the oath of office from trustee chair Richard W. Riley '54. Photo by David Crosby.



A NEW ERA

Rod Smolla's inauguration was an inspirational and energizing experience for the entire university community.

The hawk appeared suddenly, gliding majestically over the crowd, just as Rodney Alan Smolla stepped to the microphone to deliver his inaugural address after being sworn in as the 11th president of Furman.

Rather than make a fly-by appearance, though, the bird decided to remain in the area. Finding a perch near the stage in one of the university's signature oaks, it sat quietly as the new president touched on themes of civility, compassion and respect during his 20-minute address.

Although no official records have been kept, it is assumed that the hawk was the first of its breed to be on hand for a Furman inauguration.

Perhaps, somehow, it sensed the unusual nature of the occasion. As trustee chair Richard W. Riley '54, who presided over the proceedings, told the crowd, they were witnesses to a rare moment in Furman's 185-year existence.

"Presidential inaugurations have not occurred very often in the life of this institution," he said. "Of the previous 10 presidents, only two held office less than 11 years. So it is with a keen sense of history that we gather today."

Aside from the hawk's appearance, several other firsts marked the installation of Rod Smolla on October 22.

This was the first such ceremony to take place outside, at least on the current

campus, and given the magnificent weather — 60 degrees at march time, with brilliant sunshine — the venue couldn't have been better. It was believed to be the first time that Plyler Hall of Townes Science Center had been artistically rendered in cake form, courtesy of Kathy and Company of Easley, S.C. In addition, the inauguration featured two world premieres of compositions by music professor Mark Kilstofte, both commissioned especially for the occasion.

One piece, "This Amazing Day," took its inspiration from a poem by E.E. Cummings and expressed gratitude "for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes." For the other piece, "Sol La Fanfare," Kilstofte harkened back to Renaissance times to honor Smolla by "carving" a musical subject from the president's name. As the composer explained, "The syllables *sol la re* proclaim, S[m]olla the King!" Both *a capella* pieces were performed beautifully by the Furman Singers under the direction of their new conductor, Hugh Floyd '84.

As a whole, the inauguration received rave reviews as a true "feel good" experience for the university community, an inspiring launch for the new president, and a fitting culmination to an intense 72-hour period of events that began with the L.D. Johnson "What Really Matters" lecture by philosophy professor David Gandolfo on Tuesday, October 19.

Things moved into high gear on Thursday afternoon, when Smolla moderated a panel discussion on “Civility and Public Discourse” in Daniel Recital Hall. The 90-minute program featured students, faculty and alumni, including three participants on hand via remote hookups from Paris (NPR correspondent Eleanor Beardsley ’86), New York City (Carl Sullivan ’91, senior editor for MSN.com) and Winston-Salem, N.C. (Randy Eaddy ’76, an attorney and Furman trustee).

The panelists touched on a wide range of topics during the free-flowing exchange as they analyzed the American public’s growing inability to debate important topics without the conversation disintegrating into shouting and name-calling. Several pointed to our “sound-bite culture,” in which people have only shallow knowledge of issues, and world views and opinions are summed up in superficial, 30-second clips. Others touched on a growing public unwillingness to engage in substantive conversations, or to acknowledge that reasonable people should be able to disagree reasonably.

The panel’s consensus was that, despite having the ability to communicate in many more ways than in the past (Facebook, e-mail, blogs), people today are actually communicating less, tuning out the opposite side, and paying attention only to those opinions and sources that reflect their individual world views. As Cynthia King, a communication studies professor, said, discourse in American society today suffers from an overall “lack of good will, good faith and good intentions.”

Smolla would use his inaugural address the next day to expand on many of the themes and comments from the panel discussion. (See following story.)

To view the panel discussion, visit www.furman.edu/inauguration/index.htm.

After a banquet Thursday evening, the university turned out for a concert by the Furman Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Thomas Joiner ’76. The program featured Dvorak’s “Carnival Overture,” Beethoven’s Symphony No. 4, and Rachmaninoff’s “Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini,” with professor David Gross as piano soloist.

Then it was time for the main event. And following the 90-minute inaugural ceremony Friday morning, folks gathered for a casual lunch on the mall.

Once the lunch crowd scattered, the mall was quickly cleared and Furman transitioned seamlessly from inaugural mode to Homecoming 2010. (See page 24.) The last official inaugural event followed on Tuesday, October 26, when Holmes Rolston, professor emeritus of philosophy at Colorado State University, delivered the Charles H. Townes Lecture on Faith and Reason.

Although the pomp and circumstance had ended, the soaring high of Inauguration Week — symbolically represented by the hawk’s presence at the ceremony — will no doubt energize the campus for months to come. It was a grand and glorious occasion at which Furman put its best foot forward, and the good will and excitement generated will serve the university well as it moves forward into the Smolla Era. [F]

— JIM STEWART

Furman Mall was the perfect spot for the ceremony; Smolla chatted with former president David Shi, Dick Riley, and Clemson president James Barker as they “robed up;” macebearer Charles Brewer; the cake depicting the front of the Townes Center was a tasty hit. Photos by David Crosby and Jeremy Fleming.



