Good afternoon. I am delighted to be here today!

President Schlissel and Regents, I appreciate your confidence in choosing me to lead the University of Michigan-Flint at this moment in time. Honored guests, higher education delegates, community members, and friends: I am touched and grateful that you are sharing this day with us. Faculty, staff, and administrative colleagues: I value your support as we work together to enhance and strengthen our work with students. Students in the audience: You are the reason we are here.

My family also shares this day with me. My partner, Mary: you have stood with me for over 20 years as we have worked to make a difference, to seize moments of opportunity in our lives. And my children and grandchildren: You have shared me with hundreds of students and colleagues throughout your lives. You’ve grown up on college campuses and participated in campus activities and traditions as varied as hiding a 500-pound rock in our wood pile, joining alternative spring breaks, having impromptu dance recitals with an audience of supportive college students, and eating more pizza and candy than any two children should ever eat. I have learned so much from you, and the opportunities to be Mom and Nana have been my deepest joys.

I am filled with a mix of emotions today: humble, proud, and excited! I am an example of what is possible through the transformational opportunity of education. From my vantage point now, I can see the village it took to raise a chancellor. I am the beneficiary of a thousand acts of generosity, shared wisdom, high expectations, gentle and not so gentle feedback, and nudges in this direction or that from teachers, mentors, students, friends, and family. It has taken much to arrive here today as we work together to build our future.

It is time. Time to honor our history. Time to tell our story. Time to celebrate our community. And time to create our future.

Congressman Dan Kildee says that I “get Flint.” My early years were shaped by a community very similar to this one. Born in Detroit and growing up downriver, my family worked in auto and steel factories, and as bartenders and cashiers at the A&P. Young and enterprising, my early jobs included shining shoes in the bar, shoveling snow, and delivering the Monroe Evening News and the Detroit Free Press. This winter when the temps were below zero, every morning I said to Mary, “at least I do not have to deliver the Free Press this morning!”

My brother and I lived in Southgate with my Grandma (Ma as she was known to us) until we were about six and seven. She worked full-time and I would beg her to teach me to read when she got home from work. When I was four, she taught me to read my first book “Go, Dog. Go!” by P.D. Eastman. I am convinced the love of and ability to read gave me my foundation for learning. She also shaped the core of my values.

In 1968 following the riots in Detroit, we had gone downtown to the small factory where she worked. I saw a man in a burned-out window ledge and pointed him out to her. She actually pulled the car over (remember I was 10) and she said to me, “You may have a place to eat and sleep, that makes you more fortunate… but remember it never makes you better than anyone.”

After my early childhood with Ma, my family relocated and at 16 I became an emancipated minor. Though I struggled to get by, I graduated from Flat Rock High School thanks to a great deal of love and support from the families of my friends and teachers. A couple of my high school teachers have called in the past two weeks and there are Flat Rock friends here today celebrating with me.

I graduated but I was not expected to go to college. No one in my family had been to college. Despite the odds, and thanks to the encouragement of those who saw possibility in me, I did go on to college and there
I had the remarkable opportunity to engage in a rich liberal arts education with professors who had very high expectations of me.

So you see, I am the product of a community’s love and commitment. I am the product of people who laid and pointed out stepping stones that would become a pathway – a thousand acts of support and challenge that enabled a first-generation, non-college-bound, emancipated minor to stand here, in this moment as the seventh chancellor of the University of Michigan-Flint.

Today, I stand before you grateful for all who supported me along the way.

If Ma were here today, she would be very proud. In her honor, Mary and I have endowed the Margaret E. Moll scholarship, matched by a generous contribution from our cousins, the Crupis, also here today. We will be able to begin awarding scholarships next year. I can’t think of a better way to honor her than to “pay it forward” to students needing assistance to complete their degrees. We do this because we know education creates opportunity. It changed my life and made me who I am today.

And, that, my friends, is why I am here today at the University of Michigan-Flint. A university that provides opportunity to its students and the community. A university with its own unique and improbable past. A university borne out of the drive and vision of university leaders and the determination of this community.

Community leaders first made the case for why there should be a U-M campus in Flint – and even developed a bond issue to fund it. That effort was helped along by Charles Stewart Mott, who pledged $1 million – if the proposed $1.6-million bond issue was approved, which voters did in June 1950.

Mr. Mott explained his support at that time saying: “I learned that the people of Flint would consider a school bond issue. In that proposal was $1,600,000 for rebuilding the Junior College. I thought it was a corking good time to throw in my bit toward a four-year college. … I won't be losing a million dollars as someone told me. I, as well as the entire community, will gain much through this expansion of education.”

The subsequent gifts of land, buildings, and dollars from the C.S. Mott Foundation, more than 60 million dollars over nearly 65 years, have allowed the university to grow and occupy its current location downtown. That is the kind of vision and generosity that is a hallmark of the relationship between the community of Flint and the university.

In my short time here, the number of you who have asked what I needed, what you could do for the university has reaffirmed this spirit. To be embedded in this urban location is a remarkable opportunity. As a regional comprehensive university, we are a “place of purpose.” We are a community of diverse learners and scholars committed to advancing our local and global communities. In the University of Michigan tradition, we value excellence in teaching, learning, and scholarship; student centeredness; and engaged citizenship.

Through excellent scholarship, personal attention, and dedicated faculty and staff, our students become the “leaders and best” in their fields, professions, and communities. That this university is in Flint and Genesee County is purposeful and significant. And in our case, the people of Flint and the entire region have pushed and pulled us into being: lobbying on our behalf, committing time and resources to their vision of a university that serves our students.

It took generosity and leadership to make UM-Flint what it is today. It took a village (a city in fact) to birth this university. One way we honor our history is by acknowledging prior leaders.

The first leader, Dean David French worked to gain accreditation and under the first Chancellor William Moran, we formally became known as the University of Michigan-Flint and moved downtown. Chancellor Conny Nelson led the development of the Recreation Center. Then, Chancellor Clinton Jones opened the William Murchie Science Building and raised funds for the Frances Willson Thompson Library. Chancellor Charlie Nelms expanded the university across the Flint River and focused the campus on the importance of
diversity and community partnerships. Chancellor Juan Mestas provided the leadership and saw the university through its first capital campaign and its first residence hall. Chancellor Ruth Person increased enrollment significantly and established the Student Veterans Resource Center.

I stand on the shoulders of prior chancellors as we move into our future. Fueled by this rich history, with our pivot foot in the past looking to the future. UM-Flint is poised to move strongly into the future. While it is too soon to know how my tenure as chancellor will be described, I can tell you what to expect.

I will provide leadership to significantly increase the number of students earning degrees. I will be a chancellor who finds the resources to support faculty to be at their best in teaching, scholarship, and engagement of students. I will fully invest in the diversity of Flint and Genesee County, which I believe is the cornerstone of a rich UM-Flint education.

Remember: it took a village, a community, to create this university, and it is now both our privilege and obligation to continue to partner with the community to serve as a catalyst for positive change in Flint and the greater region.

Our faculty are deeply committed to academic excellence and engaged learning. Through education and public service, our faculty seeks to create a learning environment that allows students to develop critical thinking skills, become excellent in their discipline, learn problem solving through hands-on research and public service, and address issues that impact our region.

Dr. Joshua May, a lecturer in applied voice in the Music Department started an opera outreach program, in which music students have been performing an operatic version of *The Three Little Pigs* at area elementary schools. Several UM-Flint students have been teaching how music intersects with other fields such as geography, language, and math in these same schools as part of the initiative. Marketing students from the Entrepreneurs Society are helping with a Habitat for Humanity project to revitalize the Grand Traverse neighborhood of Flint. Two UM-Flint classes have teamed up to showcase the photography and lives of people that utilize Catholic Charities’ Center for Hope. Students are also developing ideas for a social media campaign to raise money for the various community service programs at Catholic Charities.

These are examples of the remarkable scholarship and research of our faculty and students.

Some of you will have identified by now that patience is not my primary virtue. I take comfort in telling myself that impatience and passion are simply different sides of the same coin. I will admit I live with a sense of urgency. This work is both personal and professional to me. I do not want to miss an opportunity!

Let’s move boldly to create our tomorrow. Let’s increase the opportunities to engage students in research projects and travel to conferences to share their research. Let’s work with the community to develop research projects that can be catalysts for change – revolutionizing how we impact childhood poverty or urban health and sustainability or any number of issues that will make the world a better place. Let’s invest in student scholarships and support in a way that both rewards merit and assists with need.

I have worked in higher education long enough to know that many universities like UM-Flint have students who are working, going to school, borrowing, working, going to school, and yet sometimes hit very small snags that cost them the opportunity to finish. Imagine if UM-Flint was able to provide financial aid to meet all of a student’s need. Increasing financial aid is a critical factor for increasing student success.

Let’s seize the opportunity to partner with the city as we continue to transform Flint. To bring more students, faculty, and staff downtown, to create campus life opportunities that will enliven this corner.

I truly believe we are on the cusp of another huge shift in the life of the university. There was the founding, then the move downtown, and now, it is time for that next big step.

I am delighted and humbled to join you in the work of creating our future – a future filled with more opportunity and success for our students and our community.
You are here today in this beautiful cultural center because in some way you are tied to the story of UM-Flint. Friends and donors whose contributions make it possible for students to achieve a U-M degree. Students like Desmond Sheppard, the talented musician and singer whom you will hear perform today, the first in his family to go to college. Desmond will graduate on May 3 with honors, including receiving the university’s most prestigious honor for undergraduates, the Maize and Blue award.

Perhaps your donations support faculty research, scholarships, or allow students to participate with faculty in research projects. Maybe you are faculty or staff who teach, advise, clean, or protect the campus, one of the many who create an environment to support students. Maybe you are an alum or a current student, one of Michigan’s “leaders and best.”

However you are connected to UM-Flint today, I am grateful you are here. You are a part of the University of Michigan-Flint. You are – this community is – what the University of Michigan is and will be. Let’s create our future together – now.

Go Blue!