

INAUGURATION SPEECH

Delivered By

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University of Liberia Fendall Campus

Friday, January 10, 2025

Salutations,

It is with the utmost honor and gratitude that I accept the Presidency of the University of Liberia (UL), and I am thankful to His Excellency President Joseph Nyuma Boakai, the University's Visitor, the UL Board of Trustees, and its designated Search Committee, for placing their trust in me to steer the nation's flagship University back on course to its true destiny.

The University of Liberia, once legendary as a jewel of West African higher education, was decimated during Liberia's civil conflict, and, since then, has been in a process of rebuilding. That rebuilding process has continued across all of my predecessors, each of whom contributed something of lasting value to the University's forward momentum. Each is to be commended for their contributions and the blood, sweat, and tears that they gave to this institution.

Dr. Al-Hassan Conteh, my immediate predecessor as Acting President of the University, dedicated himself not once but twice to this institution as its leader, and during his first term established the University of Liberia's endowment.

His successor, the late Dr. Emmet Dennis, oversaw the rehabilitation of Fendall campus through the cultivation of external investment, and welcomed Liberia's first postwar Fulbright – me – to UL, thus establishing the imprimatur of global engagement and international partnership, which lives on to this day.

His successor, Dr. Ophelia Weeks, launched UL's Gender Studies Program, a visible symbol of UL's commitment to gender equality and women's leadership. Additionally, her commitment to the sciences, to the STEM disciplines, attracted new resources to the University, creating opportunity for numerous faculty and students alike.

Her successor, President Julius Nelson, managed the University's quick transition to a school that is tuition-free for Liberian undergraduates, thus widening access to education without prejudice for socioeconomic status or family wealth. I might add that President Nelson also gave me a very warm UL athletic jacket when my colleagues and I brought the Higher Education for Conservation grant, sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development to UL in 2022. I have proudly worn this jacket on many a cold day in Massachusetts!

My bigger point is this: It takes all of us to make the University of Liberia great. It takes all kinds of people with all kinds of talents – not perfect people, mind you, but great people who care deeply about this country, this institution, and this work and are willing to make sacrifices to see it thrive, even if the journey is hard.

For that reason, my praises cannot end with a litany of my predecessors, UL's past presidents. I extend my praise and gratitude also to the faculty, students, staff, and alumni of the University of Liberia who, now and in the past, have supported and built up this institution with your labors. I see you.

Students, you have struggled to make your way here and to stay here. You have burned the midnight oil to complete your studies. You have stayed dedicated to the completion of your studies, even when you had to pause for family or work reasons, or because the school was closed. Many factors have been beyond your control, and yet, you have remained committed to your education. I see you.

Faculty, you have taught UL's students ably, even with limited resources—whether classrooms that weren't fully equipped, essential supplies and materials that were lacking, or the absence of books and other media. You have endured intermittent pay and

intermittent internet access. Many of you have set aside some of your research dreams due to the obstacles in your path, from lack of access to advanced degrees to lack of access to research funding to lack of access to needed equipment and supplies. Even access to academic publishing outlets has been a struggle. Yet, you are still here because you love Liberia, your students, and your fields of expertise. I see you.

Staff, you quietly hold this institution together, helping administrators, faculty, and students to do their part. At most institutions, staff are the most unsung, the least noticed, the least discussed. And, yet, no university can thrive, much less exist, without its staff. Whether you engage in clerical work, student support, facilities maintenance, systems administration, or any other aspect of what we call “behind the scenes work,” you are the bones, sinew, and blood of this University. Despite the challenges – logistical, material, financial, or otherwise – you come to work every day and make sure these students can learn, these faculty can teach, and these administrators can run their divisions. There is no UL without you, and I see you.

Alumni, you are UL’s ambassadors out in the world. Wherever you are and whatever you are doing, you are demonstrating to the world what the UL experience delivers. People learn about UL through you. People imagine themselves at UL because of you. And you are, perhaps, UL’s best recruiters because you can tell the personal story of UL. And you care enough about UL to support your alma mater, whether in spirit or materially. Your role in the University of Liberia ecosystem is essential and cannot be denied. You are a force and a constituency unto yourselves, both at home and abroad, and you are one of UL’s greatest treasures. These efforts bring UL great pride and add luster to our institution. I see you, too, alumni!

Given that I am a new face to many of you, you may be wondering, Who is this person and why does she want to do this job?? What are her qualifications?? What is her vision?? As I’ve been hearing on the radio and reading in the newspaper and seeing on social media all week, I’m not from around here. I’m an outsider. So, please allow me to introduce myself and tell you a bit of my story.

On March 1st, 2009, I arrived in Liberia for the very first time to attend the International Colloquium on Women’s Empowerment, Leadership Development, International Peace

and Security with a delegation from Atlanta, Georgia, that had been organized by Hon. Cynthia Blandford, a true friend of Liberia who is here with us today. I still remember the feeling I had as the airplane was landing – something stirred in my heart, but I didn't know why. I had a feeling of excitement deep down in my spirit. As soon as my foot touched the ground, I felt a sense of electricity, a kind of elation that is hard to explain. As I often tell people when I recount this story, I fell in love with the place immediately.

On my second day in Liberia, I went with my delegation from Atlanta to the JFK Hospital, where we visited the Fistula Ward to deliver several suitcases full of medical supplies and personal hygiene kits. The youngest patient that we met there was only 9 years old, and her story let me know that, as a gender and youth specialist and advocate, not to mention psychologist, I had something meaningful to contribute to Liberia. On that very same day, I met the journalist who was covering our visit to the hospital, and his name was Mr. Seboe Maparyan, a UL alumnus and Mass Comm graduate, by the way. By God's grace, a spark ignited between us and nine months later, we were married – in Liberia, on Liberian soil. It was one of the best decisions of my life. One day you will meet him as the First Gentleman of UL.

On the third day of that trip, I visited the University of Liberia and was introduced to then-President Dr. Emmet Dennis. I asked him whether the University had gender studies, given that it had an internationally renowned woman president. He said, Not yet, and I said, May I help with that? On the basis of that conversation, Dr. Dennis requested a Fulbright Specialist and I was selected. I returned a year later with a group of study abroad students and, over 13 weeks, conducted a feasibility study for a gender studies program at UL. I held focus groups and interviews with faculty, students, staff, and administrators of both genders; I met with the Minister of Gender and leaders of numerous women- and girl-focused NGOs and community-based organizations. I met with religious groups, traditional leaders, and women from the interior, as well as women marketeers and others involved in business. I even held a Gender Studies 101 demonstration course to model what a gender studies class could look like. After these many conversations, I submitted a proposal to President Dennis that offered a summary of the conversations and a model curriculum based on three core principles: The curriculum must be 1) Liberian-centric, 2) West African relevant, and 3) globally conversant. A decade later, through the efforts of many, UL's Gender Studies program launched.

I continued to visit Liberia many times after that, for stays both long and short. The common denominator across all of these visits was a focus on gender and higher education. I have made more trips than I can count. Three years ago, I worked with a group of 8 institutions, including the University of Liberia, to secure the 5-year, \$5 million Higher Education for Conservation grant from the United States Agency for International Development, or USAID. The purpose of HECA, as it is known, is to accelerate forestry, biodiversity, and conservation or FBC education in Liberia to better enable us to conserve the rapidly depleting Upper Guinean Rainforest. Liberia has a key role in this, and my part has been to lead the gender equality and social inclusion dimensions of this initiative. HECA is just one example of the kinds of things that have brought me to Liberia over the years.

Educationally, I hail from a historically Black women's college, Spelman College, an HBCU, where my major was philosophy. I have a Masters of Science in Psychology from Penn State University and a Ph.D. from Temple University, where my focus was on adolescent psychology. As an undergraduate, I was a student activist, fighting for the end of apartheid in South Africa and urging my college to divest. In graduate school, I immersed myself in critical theory, liberationist thought, and the dynamics of social movements, and early in my first academic job, I begin writing about womanism, a social and ecological change perspective rooted in the experiences and perspectives of women of African descent from around the world. I have published three books on this subject, and the most recent one just came out on Monday of this week.

After two professorial jobs in which I climbed the ranks from Assistant to Associate Professor, first at the University of Georgia and, next, at Georgia State University, I took my third position at Wellesley College, where I was hired to serve as Executive Director of the Wellesley Centers for Women, as women- and gender-focused research institute. At Wellesley, I achieved the rank of Full Professor and also served as department chair for Africana Studies for several years, in addition to running the Centers. The Centers are one of the largest and oldest gender-focused research institutes in the world. In this role, I gained a lot of administrative and fundraising experience that I am now bringing to UL.

I have also served for the last 10 years on the Board of the Directors of the Global Fund for Women, and I currently Board Chair. The Global Fund for Women is a philanthropic organization with a \$20+ million budget that funds women-led organizations and

movements for gender justice around the world. Serving on that board has been a phenomenal learning experience and has generated many valuable connections in the philanthropic sector.

As President of the University of Liberia, I will bring everything I learned over the last 30 years as a professor, administrator, executive, and fundraiser to the benefit of this institution. My values in this capacity are “The 5 E’s”: Education, Effectiveness, Efficiency, Excellence, and Ethics. Please memorize them!

When I submitted a plan back in July for my first 100 days, my focus was on a listening and learning tour. I wanted to get to know everyone, from UL’s VP’s and the Board of Trustees, to the faculty, students, staff, and alumni, to government stakeholders and community partners. I also wanted to tour every inch of this campus and all of the campuses of UL to see the prevailing conditions for myself. It was important to me to begin with a humble posture of learning and to not make assumptions about what needs to be done without talking with people and first gathering data. My tendency is to take a scientific approach to solving problems – ask a question, gather data, develop a hypothesis, pilot a solution, and then use feedback to tweak it until it is optimized. More than likely, that won’t change.

However, since I arrived less than one week ago, my sense about the urgency of certain issues has increased, and now I am inclined to add some action items to my first 100 days to-do list. I see these as items to get UL back up and running after a long and difficult hiatus, so that we position ourselves for some of the important longer-term things that will inevitably be required to get this flagship university on track towards greatness.

First, I want to affirm that we ARE open for business on Monday, January 13th. Teachers, students, and staff should report for duty. We can’t solve problems together if we aren’t present. Please show up. I’m actually really excited to see everyone!

Second, I want to move rapidly towards regularizing faculty pay, in terms of both timing and amount, starting with research about why pay lapses have occurred in the past and what we can do to prevent similar instances in the future. As part of this process, the payroll itself needs to be verified and cleaned up if there are any errors, because clearing up errors

makes more money available. It's impossible to do your job if you are worrying about whether you'll be able to pay your rent, afford food, get transportation, or pay your kids' school fees, so it helps the entire campus community to get this right.

Third, I plan to regularize UL's academic calendar, so that it is predictable and dependable year-in and year-out and coordinates well with other institutions in Liberia and internationally. Students want to know when school is starting and when it is ending, as well as when commencement will be held. Students need to be able to plan, particularly when there are other opportunities waiting, such as jobs, fellowships, or graduate study. We hamper UL students' progress – and peace of mind – when the academic calendar is unpredictable, and I intend to fix that promptly.

Fourth, I feel strongly about ensuring safe and well-functioning bathrooms around campus, with adequate sanitation supplies to support public health and the comfort and dignity of the university community. It is impossible to work or study when plagued by the call of nature. New bathrooms may not happen overnight, but I will begin working on it ASAP and keep it at a high priority. All I ask of the university community – students, faculty, and staff – is that you help by doing your part to keep things clean, healthy, and beautiful, which is a way of showing love and respect for our campus.

Fifth, I will begin fundraising immediately. Starting with contacts I already have in the States and around the world, I will start making asks to bring in the resources we need to accomplish our goals. The national subsidy is a starting place, and ~\$33 million has already been approved for this year, but if we are going to address everything that needs addressing, whether in the short term or the long term, we are going to need funding from additional sources. A healthy, fully-functioning university has income from many outside sources, including grants from public and private funders, gifts from donors and foundations, and even fee-for-service and licensing revenue. It's time to start exploring and bringing it in.

Last but not least, I want to express my commitment to gender equality and social inclusion, including disability access, starting on Day 1. Gender equality is one of my core principles. My goal is gender balance at UL. With every action I take, I will be asking whether gender balance has been considered and what we are doing to achieve it. Gender

balance doesn't just mean equal numbers; it also means equal power, equal accomplishment, equal consideration, equal contribution, and equal safety. It is hard to achieve gender balance overnight, but if you don't start early and strong, it will take you twice as long to get there. We will be about gender balance under my administration.

On a similar note, disability access and inclusion is also a priority consideration. The Liberia national disability policy sets goals and targets that have not yet been met at UL or elsewhere. Admittedly, they are hard to meet because they require infrastructure improvements and changes to longstanding processes, but these are necessary changes if we are to modernize UL and bring it into the international community of institutions. Today's colleges and universities are about disability inclusion and empowerment, and, at UL, we will take concrete actions to serve the needs and aspirations of students with disabilities, in consultation with these students themselves. I invite the entire university community to be onboard with me about this.

I have many long-term goals and priorities, but time does not permit me to outline them. During my first 100 days, I will share many of these goals and priorities with the University community and the public. Before the end of this calendar year, we will devise and launch a new 4-year strategic plan for UL to guide us along the path of institutional development. There will be time to get input from all stakeholders along the way, and I look forward to those discussions.

There is so much more that I'd like to say to this assembled audience, but I know that, in the days ahead, we will have many more occasions to speak and share. Let me just conclude with a small reflection on our institution's motto, "Lux-in-Tenebris" or "Light in Darkness." While some have found reason to critique this motto, I actually find it inspiring because it reminds me of the true purpose of education. I'd like to share a quote from the sacred scriptures of my faith, the Baha'í Faith, that speaks directly to the role of education in revealing our light:

"Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education, however, hath deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God, he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; yet by another word his station and destiny were safeguarded. The Great

Being saith: Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”

Each of us is a “mine rich in gems of inestimable value.” The role of this university – or any university – indeed, of all education across life, is to make these gems visible so that we can contribute our light to the world. It is in this spirit and with this intention that I will lead the University of Liberia, and I look forward to all that lies ahead. Thank you very much!