

LAW:

Thank you, Chair Weatherford, and the rest of the USF Board of Trustees for your continued support. As a founding member of the board, I've been in your shoes, and I share the vision you have for our university's future. I appreciate the confidence you have shown in me as USF's leader.

And thank you, Bob, for that lovely introduction. It has always been a pleasure to work alongside you to elevate the great state of Florida, and I cherish your continued friendship and partnership.

I'd also like to thank Pastor Ken Whitten for giving that beautiful invocation, and the University of Evansville's President Christopher Pietruszkiewicz for traveling here for today's festivities. And thank you to all our speakers for sharing such warm greetings. Can we please take a moment to give them a round of applause?

You know, I have stood on this stage inside this arena hundreds of times — as a student, an alumna, a trustee, and now as university president. But this time is different. I am amazed and honored to see many familiar faces of those whom I've crossed paths with over the years. I am thrilled that you're here, and I deeply appreciate your trust in me and your enthusiasm for the University of South Florida.

When I'm asked to offer a piece of advice to our students, I encourage them to seek out and hold onto two types of people in their lives: champions and mentors. Champions are the people who will fight for you throughout your career — they persuade others to give you a chance in life. Mentors are those who teach you how to do things the right way and help you navigate the nuances associated with the work.

I have been so fortunate to have both types of people in my corner throughout my career, and I would be remiss if I didn't spend a few moments recognizing just a few of those who have helped me along the way.

Thank you to Clint Brown, who is here with his wife Ciny. Clint was the managing partner for the first firm I worked for after becoming a lawyer. Your guidance and mentorship were incredibly valuable as I got started in my legal career, and I'm so happy to see you here today.

And thank you to Chancellor Raymond Rodrigues, Chair Brian Lamb, and the entire Florida Board of Governors. I am grateful for your partnership with our university as we continue serving as a resource that fuels the talent pipeline and advances the economic development of our region and our state.

I'd also like to thank our elected officials who are here in the audience this afternoon. Thank you for your advocacy and your continued support of our great university.

And I am honored that we have presidents and delegates from other colleges and universities joining us today. Thank you for visiting us and participating in one of higher education's longest-held traditions. Your leadership has inspired me during my time in this role, and I look forward to learning more from you.

Speaking of presidents, I'm delighted to see that some of our former USF presidents have joined us on the platform: the Honorable Betty Castor, Dr. Judy Genshaft, and Dr. Steven Currall. Thank you for being here and for your wisdom and encouragement. It has been an honor working with you to take USF to new heights.

When I talk about effective leadership, I make it a point to mention that no one person can accomplish everything by themselves. Every great leader has a talented team around them, and I am greatly appreciative of the members of my leadership team, our deans, and all of our faculty and staff for your dedication and hard work.

And of course, a very big thank you to my team in the Office of the President and all of those who have worked tirelessly to bring this event to fruition — work that was done in addition to their many other valuable contributions. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I would also like to thank my son Greg and his friend Diane, and my daughter Lisa and her husband Jason, for being here today. And thank you to my sister Andrea and her husband Scott. It means the world to me that you're all here — I am incredibly grateful to be surrounded by my family during this momentous occasion.

And although he could not be here with us today, I believe he is watching the live stream of this from home, I would also like to thank my father, John Fogarty, for his love and encouragement. Hi Dad, I love you.

Finally, I'd like to give a special thanks to my dear husband, Wayne. He has supported me every day throughout the past 38 years of marriage, both in my career and in our shared life together. When I was asked by Chair Weatherford to serve as USF's interim president, Wayne knew right away that this was what I was called to do.

He said to me, "Rhea, you have been preparing for this your whole life — you just didn't know it." Thank you, Wayne, for believing in me, for standing by my side, and for loving this great university as much as I do.

The University of South Florida has seen transformative change over the years – which is truly uncommon for a university of our size in a relatively short period of time.

As is often said, we stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, and we are deeply appreciative of all the contributions that thousands of individuals have made to this university in our nearly 70-year history.

But those of you who have been around the University of South Florida know that all the change we've seen thus far is still only the beginning. USF is a place of progress. And I have no doubt that our next chapter will be our greatest one yet.

When I came to the University of South Florida for the first time, I was just 18 years old, and like thousands of our students, I was the first person in my family to go to college.

To help pay for my degree, I got a job in the university's Division of Sponsored Research, which allowed me to take six credits per semester for free while supporting myself.

I never dreamed that this decision would have such a profound impact on my life.

My supervisor during that time was Dr. Bill Taft, a professor at USF and director of the university's Division of Sponsored Research. A geologist and researcher in his own right, Bill gave me so much more than just a job. In countless ways, he encouraged me. He challenged me to think bigger and beyond what was currently in front of me.

I was working for the university during a time when women were often underestimated in the workplace. Although I was young and still learning, Bill advocated for me, and he gave me the chance to prove myself as a professional.

When I was uncertain about the road ahead, he would often tell me, “You can be anything you want to be. So, who do you want to be?”

I wanted to be kind. I wanted to be a person who does well but who also does *good*.

I wanted to become a leader but also remain a student of life.

I wanted to learn. To grow. And to always be myself.

Bill gave me permission to dream like this and the courage to chase my curiosity. Then he helped me keep taking step after step in the right direction to make those dreams come true. He showed me that half of the battle is believing in yourself, and not letting the assumptions made by others define your future.

I am so grateful that Bill has joined us today...Bill, will you please stand up for a moment and be recognized?

When I reflect on my early days at USF as both an employee and a student, I can't help but think about all the incredible people in our community who continue to inspire and encourage future generations, just like Bill did for me back then.

How many Bill Tafts are out there across our university, making an impact on our students right now?

How many Bill Tafts have had similar conversations of encouragement with the hundreds of thousands of alumni who have graduated from this?

My experience over the years has shown me we have many Bill Tafts right here at USF who are focused on student success.

That is the impact we make as a university. It's what excellence looks like – not just a ranking or an award, but a way of life. Excellence is

when a life is changed for the better because someone asked, “What’s possible, and how can we make it happen?”

So now I say that to you — what’s possible?

What’s possible for this university when we move forward together?

What’s possible for this community when we galvanize the full power of USF’s resources toward the growth and progress of our region?

What’s possible for each of us when we are empowered to do our best work in a space of curiosity, courage, and compassion?

We can be anything we want to be.

So, what do we want to be?

When I first enrolled at USF, I wanted to become a doctor. In fact, on display in my office, I still have the microscope my mother gave to me as a child. But when it was time to start thinking about medical school, I was told I would have to stop working full-time to focus on my studies.

I couldn’t do that. So, I started thinking about other majors I might be interested in pursuing. After much soul-searching and exploration, I decided a business degree would be a great fit because it blended well with my work here at USF in contract negotiations.

I took a course in business law, and through a project where we had to help a local business — something clicked for me. I could become a lawyer. Then I could keep doing good, continue learning, and stay true to myself while giving back to my community.

But first, I *really* wanted my bachelor’s degree. It took me almost 10 years to earn it, but I made it happen. After graduating from USF, I cashed out my retirement savings and enrolled in law school at Stetson University’s College of Law. I started my career as a lawyer and stayed involved in the community, and especially here at USF.

No one expected me to go to college, and certainly not to law school. But I wanted to do it for myself. And if you look at our university's history, you'll see a recurring theme that defines our rising trajectory — USF has a track record of going beyond the status quo and defying expectations.

And the students who come here reflect that same ambitious mindset.

At USF, you get out of your experience here what you put into it. This is true for our students, our faculty and staff, our researchers, and our community partners.

After today's investiture ceremony, we'll visit the new Porter Family Indoor Performance Facility, a centerpiece for our Athletics District, which will only continue to grow in the years to come as we prepare for our new on-campus stadium. This location was chosen as a reminder of how the university continues to push forward by writing its own playbook and partnering with our community.

Everywhere you look on our campuses, you can see similar examples of how our university is evolving in real time.

We will soon begin highly anticipated expansion plans in Sarasota-Manatee by breaking ground on a new housing and student center complex. We are also in the planning stages for a nursing/STEM building to expand the campus' teaching and research capabilities.

Our USF St. Petersburg campus continues to explore new and creative ways to partner in the city's growth — providing knowledge and support in areas such as regional planning and economic development.

And here in Tampa, we are working hard to bolster our infrastructure. Later this spring we will open a new Student Health and Wellness Center and a new home for the Judy Genshaft Honors College.

As I mentioned, we are fully committed to launching another major project that will provide significant value to all our athletics programs and transform the experience our community has here on campus — and that is an on-campus stadium.

Our intercollegiate athletics programs can serve as the front door to the institution, cultivating a stronger community connection to our university and giving our alumni a renewed sense of pride in being a USF Bull. I want all of our alumni to remain deeply connected to their alma mater, just as I have throughout the years.

As we stay on the cutting edge of research and teaching methods and modalities, and as we engage new community partners, we are writing the next pages of our history.

Those close to me know, I like forward motion. And I like to move *fast*.

The University of South Florida's capacity for rapid growth and evolution has always been one of our strengths. It's allowed us to reach milestones once reserved for universities centuries older than ours because we are not held back by how things have been done in the past.

Reflecting on our university's history, you can see why and how we have accomplished so much.

We've transformed from a small commuter school into a Research I institution — the highest designation a university can receive for its research productivity — with three unique and thriving campuses. We're one of the top producers worldwide in generating new U.S. utility patents. And we've received widespread national recognition for graduating under-represented minority and limited-income students at rates equal to or higher than white and higher-income students.

As you can see, USF is a university on the rise. Over the past decade, no other public university in the country has risen faster in *U.S. News and World Report's* national university rankings.

We've reached these milestones, not because we need the accolades, but because we're motivated by challenge — and we're determined to reach every goal we set out for this university. The USF ethos is one of pushing past limits. It's the journey that fuels us, not the reward.

And what a journey we have in front of us...

We have endured an immense amount of challenge and change in recent years — but rather than slow us down, these events have cultivated a sense of collective empathy and optimism in our community about what we can do *next* and where we can go *together*.

USF's Strategic Plan provides us with a roadmap toward academic and research excellence. And although we've done a great deal of work to chart our path forward, there are still so many opportunities ahead.

We must continue investing in our people and in generating new innovations.

In this week dedicated to remembering the life and values of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we are reminded that we must continually foster a culture of inclusive excellence, so everyone in our community feels a sense of belonging and is encouraged to think boldly about the future.

And because we are a catalyst for global impact, our university must keep championing the actions and accomplishments that set us apart.

There are so many areas of strength at USF. I'd like to highlight several that have been identified in the Strategic Plan to help take our university to the next level.

The first is **Health Sciences**. We are home to the fastest-rising medical school in the country, and our impact is expanding thanks to our strong and growing presence within Downtown Tampa and our invaluable partnerships with healthcare organizations like Tampa General Hospital. Increasing the number of professionals who go on to work in our state's healthcare system is critical to supporting the growth of our region and state.

The second is **Environmental and Oceanographic Sciences**. Whether our researchers are studying hurricanes, clean energy, or the impacts of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, we have proven time and time again that we are committed to protecting our environment.

Our university's location and expertise make us the perfect place to host an interdisciplinary center for excellence in environmental and oceanographic sciences. This is an endeavor that will have a life-changing impact on millions of people because the health of our climate and oceans is a crucial factor in the success of our state. I remain committed to working with Florida's leaders to demonstrate this initiative's value and ensure its future success.

Third is **Global and National Security**. With the recent launch of the Global and National Security Institute and our deep connections to Tampa Bay's strong military community, USF is well-positioned to help address critical issues facing our country in national security.

Because of our expertise in this area, more resources are being provided to support our efforts. Last year, the Legislature and Governor provided a \$20.5 million increase in funding to Cyber Florida, a statewide agency housed at USF that focuses on cybersecurity. This is empowering our university to hire new faculty, expand our program offerings and help prepare more cyber-workforce-ready graduates every year.

And while we are making great progress in these three areas, our university is making incredible contributions in so many other disciplines as well. I've often said that a university is a place where pockets of knowledge can be found everywhere you look, and that is certainly true here at USF. Any activity we choose to pursue, we do so to transform lives and make powerful discoveries.

I also believe our university can strengthen the shared experience and collaboration opportunities we provide through the arts.

Not only does USF have a stellar College of The Arts and arts programming, but our campuses are also home to numerous public artworks that enhance our campuses by serving as informal gathering places and exposing our community to prominent artists and their work. These are spaces that our students, faculty, and staff pass by every day, and they are some of the most recognizable locations on our campuses.

To affirm the importance of USF's Public Art Program, I have launched a new fund that will support these beautiful works and invite our community to engage with them in a more profound way. These iconic spaces were not created just for our students and employees — they were installed to enrich the lives of *everyone* in our communities.

USF is strengthening our relationships within the community in ways we never have before. We have robust partnerships in our region's healthcare system, in the U.S. military through the United States Special Operations Command and MacDill Air Force Base, and in our local school districts, just to name a few.

These community partnerships are a two-way street. Our students benefit from the hands-on learning opportunities available through these organizations, and our partners benefit from having access to

USF's research expertise, our state-of-the-art technologies, and our talented graduates who help fill pressing workforce needs.

As president, I am committed to strengthening USF's community partnerships so we can make an even bigger impact. We are a major social and economic engine, and it's critical that we continue building and nourishing our community partnerships, because we are better together.

The role of a university is to enrich the context of life as we know it with more understanding, capability, and meaning. It is to push against that question: "What's possible?" and never settle for a final answer.

We come to USF just as we are, with all our potential and curiosity.

As the eighth president of the University of South Florida, I believe our path forward will be focused not only on our pursuit of excellence, but on caring for each other along the journey.

We must keep moving in pursuit of our goals for the future. We must continue practicing compassion toward everyone in our communities. And we must always maintain the courage to be ourselves.

That was the path Bill Taft laid out for me those many years ago:

Go boldly, do great things, and don't forget to be yourself.

That is who we want to be, and that is what today is all about.

I look around this room and I see that the University of South Florida is not just a place. It is an idea that lives in each of us. A spirit that unites us in an ambition to make life better. To chart our own course. To create a university beyond boundaries.

When I was getting ready to leave my job at USF and go to law school, the team in the Office of Sponsored Research held a little going away party for me. I was grateful to my colleagues and excited for the next

step ... that is until the moment came for me to walk out the door and actually do it.

After crossing the threshold, I turned around and burst into tears. USF was my home. How could I leave this place that I loved? This place that had taught me so much, supported me, and nurtured me? I didn't know if I would be successful in law school or if there would be a job waiting for me on the other side.

In his usual wise way, Bill came over to me, looked me in the eye, and said, "You can always come back. There will always be a place for you here at USF."

Well, Bill, I took that reassurance to heart. Knowing that USF prepared me well for this next chapter and would always be a part of my life gave me the courage to move forward and do the *next right thing*.

And here I am – capping off my career in the most poetic way imaginable, giving back to a place that has given so much to me. My alma mater.

In closing, I say this to everyone in this room: this, too, is your home. This university belongs to you and will be better because of you. Together, we can be anything we want to be, and when we link arms, there is nothing we cannot achieve.

It is the privilege of my life to serve as the University of South Florida's eighth president and to give back to a community that has given so much to me over the years.

Thank you.