

**President H. Patrick Swygert**  
**138<sup>th</sup> Charter Day Convocation**  
**March 4, 2005**  
**Cramton Auditorium**  
**Howard University**

Dr. Richard English, Provost and Chief Academic Officer of  
Howard University, and our Keynote Speaker today

Distinguished Alumni Honorees and other Specially Invited  
Guests

Corporate Sponsors

Students

Faculty,

Staff

All

Welcome to our Annual Charter Day Convocation and thank you for taking time out to share in this ceremony, marking the 138<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of Howard University.

Each year, we come together for this observation cognizant of all that Howard has given to us since its inception.

Beyond its tangible purpose as a place where to acquire an education and all its ascendant benefits, Howard remains a symbol of our quest for equality and justice and our resolve to dream, build and accomplish, regardless of the obstacles that are placed in our way.

Indeed, in 138 years, we have built a formidable legacy of leadership and service in America and throughout the world in the fields of law, civil rights, education, medicine, entrepreneurship, government and the public service, the arts and diverse areas.

Our alumni have been the trailblazers living the Howard legacy and in the process, advancing humankind and enriching our lives in many ways.

I salute all our alumni, particularly our honorees who are here today, and I salute those who are here in spirit only.

There is one alumnus in particular, whose memory I would like to recall for a moment. He was a special son of Howard who gave freely of himself and of his resources; someone who inspired us with his devotion and his passion not just to this institution but to the entire community of humankind.

Ordinarily, he would have been here today, standing tall as usual, despite his advancing years, but on Feb. 3, this year, Ossie Davis quietly slipped away to the other side. He was 87 years old.

We miss his presence of course, but we are disinclined to utter as much as a sigh in deference to the magnificent life he lived, and the generosity with which he gave of his talent, his passion and his resources.

We are truly grateful for the wonderful gift of his presence in the world, and I dare say, that there is much that he left us that it would be in our interest to emulate.

Ossie Davis, for example, had been a champion of the Civil Rights Movement, unwavering in his support and his commitment to the struggle for justice and equality. He was an actor, a writer, a director, an unchained spirit born to laugh and to love as those who knew him well will attest.

Here was a man who, at the age of 15, walked and hitchhiked from Georgia in the 1930's where "living while

Black” was tantamount to a crime, to Washington D.C. to attend this institution.

It was a profound act of courage, a demonstration of character and determination, and a symbol of his defiance of the status quo that made it so hard for African Americans to access an education in the land of their birth.

Throughout his life, Ossie Davis remained committed to the struggle for freedom from the shackles of discrimination and racial oppression, and up to the time of his death, he was concerned that the progress was not fast enough and slipping in many ways.

Ossie believed that much of this was due to what he called the absence of a moral assignment for our generation.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, he said, African Americans were very clear on what their assignment was: to bring an end to slavery.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was to rid America of Jim Crow and segregation. To the extent that those objectives have been achieved, the question that many of us seem to be asking is “what next?” “where do we go from here?”

For many of us, the answer comes with a realization that the civil rights agenda is incomplete; that the quest for social justice is barely underway; grinding slowly along, uninspired by our own apathy or the willingness of officialdom to hand to us any more than they think we deserve.

The moral assignment of this generation then, is to finish that agenda; to pursue vigorously the fruits of justice in

education, healthcare, housing, equal employment opportunity, youth programs and poverty alleviation and eradication among the most vulnerable.

Further, we must begin to take more of our destiny in our own hands; to utilize existing opportunities and devise new ways to empower ourselves.

We must pursue with a greater sense of purpose and a renewed spirit of cooperation, the dreams of the civil rights leaders for our community, and we must begin a final assault on erasing the deleterious effect of the historical injustices that we are unwitting heirs to.

As it was more than a half a century ago when our community fought for the fundamental rights to which we are

all entitled to, education remains a critical pathway to social mobility and economic sustainability.

Here I pause to applaud all our students who are here today and indeed, all the students of Howard University. Many of you have battled tremendous odds to be here and I commend your ambition, your spirit and your efforts.

In a constantly changing world, I know you are aware of the importance of education and training in allowing you to move ahead.

As President of Howard University, I recognize the enormous challenge and opportunity that I have to serve you in this regard. And, I pledge to you today that I will do all that is in my power to support your visions and advance the cause of equality and justice in our country and the world.

Allow me to again express my thanks to all of you; students, faculty and staff for the roles you continue to play in advancing the welfare of our community.