

9-13-2018

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Recommended Citation

Rodrigues, Jill, "Celebrating President Farish: A Life and Legacy" (2018). *Featured News Story*. 194.
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Celebrating President Farish: A Life and Legacy

RWU Community gathers to honor our 10th president's bold leadership, tenacious courage and love for the student community



RWU Dance Theatre performs original choreography by Jenny Rocha '96 at the celebration of the life and legacy of President Farish. Image Credit: Oggi Photography

September 13, 2018 | By Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – On Wednesday, the Roger Williams University community and greater community gathered to share a powerful celebration of the life and legacy of Donald J. Farish, who died on July 5, 2018, while serving his eighth year as our president.

With hundreds of guests in the Campus Recreation Center and many more watching via livestream, the multimedia celebration included poetry and dance, readings and remembrances by students, alumni, faculty members, parents of alumni and members of the greater community, reflecting the ideals that motivated and defined President Farish and the bonds that he forged both on campus and in the community.

“President Farish was especially cherished by those who viewed him as the most important component of the university: the students,” said Jake Brostuen '18, who served as Student Senate President in his senior year. “You didn’t have to be a member of the Honors Program or captain of a sports team to have a personal relationship with the man who most students lovingly referred to simply as ‘Farish.’ In fact, many of the students who knew him best were those who simply took the time to say hello and start a conversation with him when he was eating his lunch at the commons, walking across the university quad, or heading to one of the countless student-run university events he attended. It was obvious that he cared not only about the students who were very involved, but that he genuinely cared about the wellbeing and success of every student.”



Members of the Pokanoket Nation perform a Tribal Chief Honoring Ceremony, dedicated to President Farish.

Many community members sharing their personal reflections about President Farish noted his tenacity in confronting the issues of higher education head-on, devotion to creating an inclusive community on campus, and bold efforts to integrate the university within the greater community. As RWU's 10th president, he provided a vision for a modern university, aiming to "build the university the world needs now." He had a remarkable 50-year career in higher education, transforming Roger Williams into a vital institution devoted to community engagement, college affordability and equity.

President Farish launched the Affordable Excellence initiative in 2012, to make higher education more affordable and provide families clarity and transparency on tuition costs. He made experiential education the cornerstone of an RWU education, empowering students to put their knowledge and skills to work solving real-world problems with community partners, and led the opening of a significantly expanded presence and mission with the new Providence campus.

"President Farish had the courage to challenge and change the traditional learning experience," developing students who "become involved and caring individuals," said Keith Johnson, parent of a 2018 graduate. "He expanded the purpose of a college education to not just teach work-related skills, but to help you grow personally and intellectually within a community."

In his fearless advocacy that everyone should have the opportunity to get a college education, including speaking out on national issues like DACA, "he symbolized what potential can be realized when we actually give others a chance – it was fitting he was named president of a university whose namesake also believed in that sentiment," said Monsurat Ottun, a 2016 graduate of the RWU School of Law. "President Farish represented hope. Though he is no longer physically with us, his legacy is tied to every one of us. It's tied to this state and to this university. He lives on through our continued pursuit of inclusion, support, and justice for all. In that way, his spirit never dies."

A Tribute to President Farish



Students and faculty members emphasized that President Farish’s leadership represented fairness, equality and inclusion. As examples, they pointed to his affirming a welcoming and supportive space when the presidential administration rescinded national educational guidance for the transgender student community, and bringing together all sides on campus to discuss changing Columbus Day to Indigenous Peoples’ Day. “Even in his passing, his leadership by example has amplified our devotion to be a united and inclusive campus, one that will, no doubt, endure for years to come and to continue to enhance the student experience at RWU,” said Student Senate President Kayla Devin ’19.

Ray “Two Hawks” Watson, from the Pokanoket Nation, spoke of how President Farish became not just a friend but a great ally to his community. With RWU located on what was once ancestral Pokanoket Nation land, President Farish became the “embodiment of the same spirit of unity, understanding and mutual respect that almost 400 years ago led to the founding of the State of Rhode Island,” said Watson. “President Farish was not only a man of courage, truth and honesty, but also a man whose legacy continues to keep hope alive that the work he started will be completed.”

“Let us honor his efforts by ensuring that his vision is brought to fruition,” Watson continued. “Let us be the change in the world that we seek, and let us be an example to the world over of how we deal with past injustices and current challenges in a manner that ensures a brighter future for us all.”

Throughout the event, his deep connection with students and with engaging the local community resonated in the celebratory elements. The Pokanoket Nation opened the occasion with a “Local Tribal Chiefs Honoring Ceremony,” filling the gymnasium with the rhythmic pounding beat of drums. Emily Rizzo ’19 sang “For Good,” from *Wicked*, accompanied by faculty member Nancy Rosenberg, while Hawkwart performed the Canadian National Anthem in tribute to President Farish’s Winnipeg roots. Pairing up, Jesse Ramos ’14 and senior Melissa Mota delivered a solemn reflection of President Farish’s revolutionary vision and steadfast values through slam poetry. Jenny Rocha ’96 renewed her original choreography in “Mandorla” – staged by the RWU Dance Theatre – to share one of President Farish’s favorite dances created by an alumna.



Maia Farish (left) presents Student Senate leaders, Jake Bristuen (far right) and Kayla Devin (second to right) with President Farish's Student Senate gavel.

In closing the celebration, President Farish's wife, Maia, offered a gift to the current and previous Student Senate presidents – Kayla Devin and Jake Brostuen – that would carry forward his legacy as a student leader to the next generations: the gavel gifted President Farish as he concluded his leadership on the Student Senate at the University of British Columbia. With the student leaders still on stage, Maia concluded the ceremony with President Farish's aspiration for the incoming class at Convocation 2014 and which he extended as a vision for the entire RWU community:

"Treat your fellow students kindly, and with respect, as if they were members of your own family. I want you to commit to helping create and sustain an open and inclusive community that is safe for everyone. I want you to be prepared to intervene should you see examples of harassment, or discrimination, or sexual assault. In short, I want you to look out for each other. Help us preserve a community at Roger Williams that, like our namesake, does not merely tolerate, but actively celebrates, the diversity of backgrounds, beliefs, and heritages that collectively make us such an interesting and intriguing place to be. "

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