

“Yours For The Building”

Rep. John Lewis addressed UNH graduates

Wednesday, July 29, 2020



VIDEO FROM 1994; COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS BY REP. JOHN LEWIS

“For more than 30 years, John Lewis has had an unwavering commitment to the civil rights movement,” then-UNH President Dale Nitzschke said in his 1994 introduction of that year’s commencement speaker. Nitzschke went on to say it would be a great honor to have Lewis speak on “one of the most important days of a UNH student’s life.”

At the time, the civil rights icon had represented Georgia’s Fifth Congressional District for eight years. When he died on July 17, Lewis had served 17 terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. One of the organizers of the 1963 March on Washington, Lewis is the first Black member of Congress to lie in state at the U.S. Capitol. His funeral will take place July 30 at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, once led Martin Luther King Jr. Lewis will be buried in Atlanta’s South-View Cemetery, which was started in 1866 by former slaves.

“As a civil rights activist and political leader, John Lewis demonstrated a courage and resilience that was rare in our country’s history. He was arrested dozens of times, and endured savage beatings, while trying to force his country to realize the basic dignity of African Americans and to grant them the right to vote.”

In his address to UNH graduates that May day in 1994, Lewis told students they were witnessing one of the most dramatic and moving periods in history.

“All around the world, we are in the midst of a revolution of ideas and values. The struggle is being waged in every nation, among every people, by peaceful means, by propaganda, diplomacy, financial pressures, strikes, ballots and bullets. We have seen men sacrifice truth for a false and negative peace,” he said.

Lewis had just returned from South Africa and the inauguration of President Nelson Mandela. He told students he was convinced the world had much to learn from the African country on how to build a truly, multiracial democratic society.

"I think South Africa has taken a great leap down that long road toward building a society, as Nelson Mandela has said, free of racism and free of sexism.....Having participated in the American civil rights movement, I know firsthand the difficulty of the struggle to overcome the legacy of an oppressive political system," Lewis said.

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UNH News Briefs

OMSA candidates to field questions

The search committee for the position of director of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs (OMSA) invites faculty, staff and students to meet the final four candidates.

The candidates are June Paris-Miller, director for the Office of Multicultural Affairs at Macalester College; Cheryl Joy Daly, assistant dean for Multicultural and Special Programs at the University of Maine, Orono; Thomas Stokes, assistant dean and director of multicultural affairs at College of the Holy Cross; and Jose Hernandez, instructor for the division of education at Bethune-Cookman College in Daytona, Florida.

Each candidate is scheduled to answer questions and listen to community concerns from 11 a.m. to noon at the MUB. Candidates will be available at the following times: Paris-

Noted civil rights leader will be keynote speaker at spring commencement

United States Representative and noted civil rights activist John Lewis will be this year's spring commencement speaker, UNH President Dale Nitzschke announced this week.

About 2,000 graduates and their families and friends will gather at Cowell Stadium Saturday, May 21, at 10 a.m., for the outdoor ceremony. This is the university's 124th annual spring commencement since UNH was established in Hanover, and its 101st ceremony in Durham.

Lewis, who has represented Georgia's Fifth Congressional District since 1986, has dedicated his life to protecting human rights, securing personal dignity and building what he calls "The Beloved Country."

"For more than thirty years, John Lewis has had an unwavering commitment to the civil rights movement," said Nitzschke, "and it will be a great honor to have him speak on one of the most important days of a student's life at UNH."

Lewis will be awarded an honorary doctorate of humane letters, along with novelist Alice McDermott, who graduated from UNH in 1978. The author of three novels, she was nominated in 1987 for the National Book Award for her novel, *That Night*.

Born the son of sharecroppers in Alabama in 1940, Lewis



Congressman John Lewis (D-Ga.), keynote speaker for spring commencement

Whitney Young, and A. Philip Randolph. Lewis met King in 1961 during the Freedom Rides, which challenged segregation at interstate bus terminals.

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"As I worked throughout the South during the 60s, I saw civil rights workers and indigenous people whom we were trying to help with their heads cracked open by nightsticks, lying in the street weeping from tear gas, calling helplessly for medical aid. I saw old women and young children in peaceful protest, who were run down by policeman on horses, beaten back by fire hoses, and chased by police dogs. Yet these people were still able to forgive, understand, and sing, 'Ain't going to let nobody turn me around.'"

Speaking words that still ring true today, Lewis stressed "our nation is at a crossroads." Our mission, he told students, should be to bring people together "speaking a common language and dedicated to a common enterprise — the common good." You have the power to lead, Lewis said, telling graduates that if they worked for a standard of excellence in their lives, "then the new and better world of which we dream is yours for the building."

Despite being arrested, teargassed and beaten numerous times — his skull was fractured during the 1965 march in Selma known as “Bloody Sunday” — Lewis remained committed to civil rights throughout his life.

UNH’s Jason Sokol is a historian of the civil rights movement and has written extensively about those years, most recently in “The Heavens Might Crack: The Death and Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.” His research has touched on Lewis as well.

“As a civil rights activist and political leader, John Lewis demonstrated a courage and resilience that was rare in our country’s history. He was arrested dozens of times, and endured savage beatings, while trying to force his country to realize the basic dignity of African Americans and to grant them the right to vote,” Sokol says.

“His recent passing is so tragic because it comes at a moment when African Americans’ basic rights and dignity are once again under assault. Now we have to do the work without him — the work of raising our voices, of protesting in the streets, until our elected leaders rededicate themselves to protecting Black people’s lives, and to making it easier for all Americans to vote.”

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