

Three defining moments shape a presidential life

March 27, 2014 2:30 AM Ryan Rivet

rrivet@tulane.edu

As Tulane University President [Scott Cowen](#) made his way down the center aisle of McAlister Auditorium before he was to deliver his “Last Lecture” on Wednesday (March 26), he shook hands with students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends, all there to hear him discuss the defining moments that brought him to where he finds himself now ? personally and professionally.



Tulane University President Scott Cowen delivers his “Last Lecture” about the defining moments in his personal and professional life. (Photos by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Presented by Mortar Board, the “Last Lecture” is typically a figurative exercise ? what would one talk about if this was the final lesson of his or her career. In Cowen's case, it was far more literal. While the president will certainly address the university again before he leaves office on June 30, and later will return to the classroom to teach on campus, this lecture was an important piece of the good-bye puzzle.

In an often-emotional address, Cowen recounted three episodes in his life that contributed significantly to making him the man he is today, snapping into focus why he is so passionate about certain things.

He began by talking about his struggles with dyslexia in a school environment in the 1950s that failed to recognize and properly help children with learning disabilities, instead labeling those students like him as “stupid,” “lazy,” or simply “not caring” about school. It was his second-grade teacher, a woman Cowen called his “savior,” who eschewed the pejorative labels and saw that he could, indeed, learn with extra attention and hard work.

Cowen said his experiences as a child laid the foundation for his advocacy for education.

“The reason I'm so passionate about K through 12 [education] is I see other 'dumb' people like I was,” Cowen said. “I don't want them to go through what I went through. If I can help just one child, I'd do that for that teacher who helped me.”



“I would not wish on any of you dyslexia, the experience I had in the Army or Hurricane Katrina. But what I know is, those are the factors that made a difference,” an emotional Scott Cowen told the audience in McAlister Auditorium.

Cowen continued discussing subsequent defining moments ? an arduous experience in the U.S. Army's Officer Candidate School and then dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the rebuilding of the university after the storm ? incidents that he said will stay with him his entire life.

He implored those in the audience to reflect on their own defining moments and how they handled them, and use those experiences to assess one's character.

“How one confronts those defining moments, overcomes them and uses them really defines who they are,” Cowen said. “I would not wish on any of you dyslexia, the experience I had in the Army or Hurricane Katrina. But what I know is, those are the factors that made a difference.”

Cowen closed by telling the audience, especially the students, that their measure of success should be about more than money or titles ? happiness, passion and impact on the world are more accurate benchmarks of a successful life.

“I've told students here for years that when you die no one will remember you for what you did for yourself; they will only remember you for what you did for others,” Cowen said.

The audience that was pindrop silent for much of the lecture responded with a standing ovation when Cowen was done. During the Q&A session that followed, he was repeatedly thanked for his candor.

President Cowen's “Last Lecture” can be heard in its entirety below.