

An Evening with Ora
Meadow Brook Hall
Dec. 11, 2019

Welcome to Oakland University.

Tonight, I'd like to make little wager with you, although I'm not usually a betting person. But I must say, I like the odds on this bet.

If I don't persuade you that you'll love what is going on here at Oakland University, well then, your next dinner is on Mike.

Here's the bet: I bet you're going to hear, see and feel something tonight that will persuade you to become an active part in what we're building here at Oakland University.

Maybe you think it's just a sales pitch.

It's not.

In my heart, I am a scientist.

I look at the facts.

I'm driven by what the data reveal.

If I'm going to dedicate myself to something, it has to be for the right reason. It has to be important and impactful. And, it has to be rewarding.

All I'm asking is for you to take a look at Oakland the way I did when I first thought of making Oakland my home, a place I now refer to as THE UNIVERSITY OF CHOICE.

I began my career in medicine where my primary medical research focused on the physiologic and molecular mechanisms responsible for disorders of growth and puberty. The logical background for a university president, to be sure.

I graduated from Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine. You'll have to do your own research on the year of my graduation. It was sometime around the inception of the personal computer and before the birth of the internet.

I spent two decades at Indiana University, including serving as executive associate dean for research at IU School of Medicine, and president/CEO of Riley Hospital.

And then, my home address was just down I-94 at that university that stamps a large block M on everything. At the University of Michigan, I served as the health system CEO, and oversaw three hospitals and more than 120 health centers.

Oh, and by the way, along the way, I had three children and a wonderful marriage to an internationally renowned transplant surgeon.

I'm proud to report all three children are happily married. And, before you can ask, I will show you pictures of my five grandchildren, and tell you about their latest and greatest accomplishments.

But as we all know, sometimes life doesn't turn out the way you expect.

On a snowy night in 2010, my life was upended when my husband lost control of his car and was struck by a semitrailer and killed.

My family lost so much that night, but in that tragedy was a lesson, a lesson about the fragility and fleeting nature of life.

It's not a lesson that's unique to me.

All of us have lost someone close to us. There is suffering and grief throughout the world. What I learned is that each person has to respond to the opportunity to build and rebuild their lives.

And, I learned making a positive change, and making a difference requires a commitment – every day.

After leaving Ann Arbor, I worked as senior VP for Eli Lilly biomedicines. And then, I landed here...at Oakland University.

Landed is the right word. I'm firmly planted here.

Why did I choose to come to Oakland University? And, what continues to inspire me and has turned me into one of the university's most passionate advocates?

Three words: Promise. Opportunity. And community.

From the time this place was conceived through today and considering the vision of tomorrow, Oakland University has been committed to cultivating the full potential of a diverse and inclusive community.

Everything we do is built on that promise.

When I came here, I looked around and realized that this is a place where I can make a real difference. And it is a place where passionate people working together can make real, positive change.

Supporting higher education is a cause, especially these days when there is cynicism about the cost of college degrees, and some people even doubt the irrefutable findings of science. Clearly, we must be advocates for the power of higher education.

In several minutes, Scott Kunselman, our chief operating officer, will give you a tour of the many developments, new buildings and renovated spaces that have transformed Oakland from the commuter college you might have known twenty years ago into the thriving campus where enrollment has grown steadily since 2009.

If you haven't been to campus lately, the change and improvements are staggering.

In October of last year, we reopened the expanded Oakland Center, which is not only the bustling meeting place for students, but an increasingly popular regional venue. Last year, more than 1.5 million visitors passed through the OC.

Since 2012, we've added Hillcrest Hall, the Engineering Center, Elliott Tower, Oak View Hall and the Human Health Building.

We are also quite proud that we are among the most welcoming and safest campuses in the country, and highly accessible.

What's at the core of our transformation?

We share a mission, vision and common values. In fact, we are in the midst of drafting a values statement to clarify exactly how our values inform our identity.

Oakland is located in the heart of the tri-county area, and on the border of the second and third most populated counties in the state.

A great majority of our students come from Oakland and Macomb counties. For many, many students, Oakland provides the high-quality education that translates into good-paying jobs.

And, I'm proud to say, Oakland University graduates are building the regional and state economy. Here's a fact I especially like: More than 95 percent of all OU grads who are working are working in Michigan.

We have a strategic plan that is built on four pillars: student success, research, community engagement, and diversity, equity and inclusion.

We are in the forefront of addressing student debt, finding a path for adults over 25 to get their degrees, and we're working to be the top university in supporting our graduates as they enter the workforce.

We consider ourselves a regional institution with many cultural amenities, and we're proud of being intertwined with the communities where many of our students have grown up and may return to work and live.

During the academic year, we have a range of lectures, concerts, recitals and community group meetings that reflect the diversity of our student population and the region.

When was the last time you attended a concert at Meadow Brook amphitheater? A play at Meadowbrook Theatre? A concert at Varner Hall?

Played golf at Katke-Cousins or the Sharf? Came to a lecture coordinated by OU's Center for Community Engagement?

Just a few weeks ago, Lech Walesa, one of the most influential people of the 20th century was a feature speaker.

Our Oakland University is not only a microcosm of the regional community, we strive for it to be a model community of diversity, equity, inclusion and a vital resource for research and community engagement.

Frankly, there are many challenges on the path to success, yet we cannot succeed without the help of people like each of you here tonight.

Continuing our transformation and being THE UNIVERSITY OF CHOICE depends on vital support from our community of active supporters

I hope you take a moment and realize the power that you have to make a difference here at Oakland.

I am betting on you.

Thank you.