

Madam President

Elizabeth Garrett had two prepared, but undelivered, speeches on her desk last summer. One was for the University of Oklahoma's 2015 commencement address and the other for her Sept. 18 inauguration as the 13th—and first woman—president of Cornell University.

"I had sabbatical leave for seven months prior to July 1 when I started here," she says from her office in Ithaca, New York. "I was fortunate to have the freedom during that time to study and learn about Cornell, and to write my inaugural speech and also the OU commencement speech, neither of which has been given."

Without missing a beat she adds with a laugh, "Let's hope the inaugural speech goes better."

In an unprecedented move, OU commencement was cancelled last spring due to weather. Garrett was in Norman on May 8 for a day of activities leading up to that evening's planned address, including a luncheon where she received her honorary doctorate; a reception at her sorority, Chi Omega; and time with her former boss and mentor, OU President David L. Boren, and First Lady Molly Shi Boren.

While she won't reveal the contents, Garrett remains hopeful that she will still be able to give that speech prepared for the Class of 2015, albeit possibly a year later for the Class of 2016.

"I am not entirely sure if it will happen, but we are going to try our very hardest to make it back next year for graduation," she says. "The invitations have been extended. However, Cornell has a medical school in Qatar and it will depend on that graduation schedule. I am cautiously optimistic. I have my fingers crossed."

Garrett has a deep connection to the state and to OU. Her mother's family arrived when Oklahoma was still known as Indian Territory, while her father's family arrived during the Land Run. Both are graduates of OU, as are her grandmother and her sister, Laura.

After graduating from Putnam City North High School, Garrett descended on the university where she captured numerous awards and impressed her professors with a serious devotion to her studies. Among those is David Levy, OU David Ross Boyd professor emeritus of history.

He has remained a mentor to his former student throughout her impressive ca-

BY SUSAN GROSSMAN

Beth Garrett is the first female to serve as president of Cornell University and is considered one of the nation's leading scholars of law, campaign reform, and direct democracy referendum. Her career has taken her from the Supreme Court to The Hague.

Robert Barker/Cornell University



As the first female president of Cornell, Elizabeth Garrett may have traded crimson and cream for carnelian and white, but her core is solid Sooner.

reer and he describes her as someone who possesses three remarkable characteristics rarely found in the same person: intelligence of a very high order; idealistic and ethical values; and incredible energy and breathtaking efficiency matched with iron self-will.

“Elizabeth was more than an outstanding student,” Levy said last spring. “She was a member of Mortar Board, Pe-et, Outstanding Senior Woman, elected chair of Student Congress four years in a row, and made Phi Beta Kappa in her junior year.”

Her experience at OU, where she majored in history, prepared her for the future, Garrett says.

“Professors paid amazing attention to students at OU.

I was equipped with confidence and a set of tools that have continued to support me in my career. David Levy stands out as someone I credit for that. And, the study of Intellectual History of 19th Century Europe with Dr. Robert Nye is another. He taught me how to write.”

Always a straight-A student, Garrett recalls writing her first paper in Nye’s class and getting back a sea of red ink.

“I had never made anything but As up until that point,” she says. “It wasn’t until after I rewrote that paper again and again and I worked with him that I really learned how one writes effectively. That is a skill I have taken with me in every dimension.”



Robert Taylor

Beth Garrett returns to Ellison Hall, home to the OU Student Association, on a visit to campus in 2004. The 1985 alumna served four terms as chair of OU’s Student Congress and was named to a string of student honors that included the President’s Leadership Class, Mortar Board, Pe-et and Outstanding Senior Woman.

“I have followed her career and know that she has the intellect and temperament for the job of president of Cornell,” he says. “I am very proud of her. Elizabeth is representing women in one of the biggest academic arenas possible. She has a huge responsibility and I know she is ready for it.”

Of his notoriously difficult written exams, Nye explains it was his own experience as a student who, like Garrett, had confidence in his writing ability until he was handed an exam riddled with corrections from one of his professors.

“Clear, concise writing is so critical,” he says. “To form and articulate positions and arguments is essential. It makes me happy to hear from my former

students that they learned how to write from me.”

Aside from the rigors of the classroom, Garrett says she also learned a great deal outside the OU classroom walls.

“I was very involved in student politics and government, which meant that I had a role to play in governance. I sat on the budget committee for the university and was taken seriously by the administration and professors,” she says. “I also learned how to effectively communicate and make persuasive cases for particular courses of action. We had at that time student activity fees which the top students managed and that was an important tool that I have taken with me into this job.”

Garrett never had her sights set on being a university profes-

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Nye was a George Lynn Cross Research Professor of History at OU before joining the faculty of Oregon State University in 1994. Now retired, he remembers Garrett as an extraordinary, well organized student who often came to his office after class prepared for discussion with a list of questions.

sor, let alone a president. In fact, she always thought she would be a banking litigator in Oklahoma City or Dallas. Yet, as she assumes her new role as president of Cornell, Garrett says it is remaining open to possibilities where unexpected opportunities lie that led her to the helm of this Ivy League institution.

“Once I got into higher education administration during my tenure at the University of Chicago, I enjoyed it and thought I was adding value to the institution,” she says. “I was not particularly ambitious to be president of an institution. For me it is important to lead an institution that coincides with my values in a deep way, which first was at the University of Chicago, then at the University of Southern California and now at Cornell.”

Her career trajectory has been anything but traditional. After earning a degree in history from the University of Oklahoma in 1985, Garrett headed to law school at the University of Virginia where she graduated first in her class in 1988. From there she clerked for Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and served as legislative director and tax and budget counselor for then-U.S. Sen. David Boren. In addition, Garrett was a professor of law at the University of Chicago and the first woman provost of the University of Southern California, the post she held before leaving for Cornell.

It might be odd for Garrett to think that her former boss and mentor, Boren, is now her peer. And like most college presidents, Garrett says she shares many of the same concerns regarding the future of higher education.

Foremost is reduced federal funding for research.

“The U.S. has led the world in innovation because of the research that has been conducted at our research universities,” she says. “This kind of research has direct applications, like in medical trials for example, and there is also basic research that may not have an immediate impact, but is equally important. The U.S. is decreasing its investment in university-based research and if that is not changed we will fall behind in the world.”

Secondly, Garrett is concerned about the cost of higher education, an issue that she prefers to reframe as the value of, and investment in, higher education rather than simply focusing on the dollar amount.

“Students who attend and graduate from a great university like Cornell or the University of Oklahoma will find their lives much better had they not attended those great universities,” she says. “The benefits will far outweigh what a family invests and it is not just economic. A great education allows you to have a more fulfilling and joyful life. We are not focusing enough on those sorts of benefits from higher education.”

At the core of her own life and career is a solid foundation in liberal arts, specifically history, something Garrett knew she



Robert Taylor

President Boren and First Lady Molly Shi Boren greet Garrett during the Honorary Degree luncheon last May. “If I were to count on the fingers of one hand the people I’ve known with the most remarkable intellect, she would be on that list,” Boren said of the former U.S. Senate intern who eventually served as his tax and budget adviser, legal counsel and legislative director.

wanted to study. History is how one best understands current situations and comprehends ways to respond to challenges, she says.

It seems fitting, then, as she begins to preside over a sprawling and complex mix of academics and personnel that includes nearly 22,000 students, 1,600 professors, 7,000 staff members, 250,000 alumni, seven undergraduate colleges, and satellite campuses in New York City and Qatar, that she finds herself at home among the historical offerings of the famed Ivy League institution. Cornell Libraries own archival and original copies of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address written in Abraham Lincoln’s own handwriting and the 13th Amendment.

“I just saw these documents literally 20 minutes ago,” she says. “It is so exciting to me. History allows us to connect with people who had a profound impact for society, both for good and for bad.”

So when asked if she feels like she is in the right place at the right time, Garrett laughs again, and replies, “Absolutely.”

Beginning her higher education as a student of history, Garrett is now making history in a career that has come beautifully full circle.



Susan Grossman is a freelance writer living in Norman.