

# *An* Inauguration





# Overdue



*After two years as acting president, Joseph Harroz Jr. and the OU family took a momentary pause to celebrate the University's past and future.*

BY LYNETTE LOBBAN  
PHOTOS BY TRAVIS CAPERTON

It was an occasion worthy of pomp and circumstance. After leading the University of Oklahoma for more than two years, Joseph Harroz Jr. took the stage at the Lloyd Noble Center on Sept. 17 to be officially inaugurated as OU's 15th president.

Heralded by trumpets and draped in flowing robes, a procession of academic and political dignitaries made their way through the center of a largely masked and socially distanced crowd on the floor of the arena.

After the august Kiowa Black Leggings Society had presented the colors of the United States and Oklahoma, and the final notes of the national anthem had floated to the rafters, OU Board of Regents Chair Michael Cawley stepped up to the mic and announced in his rich baritone, affirming to all present, that this was “a real shindig.”

Indeed, and one long overdue.

Although Harroz had served in interim capacity since June 2019 and was officially installed in his role in May 2020 by the OU Board of Regents, the ceremony had been postponed as the new president and his administration navigated a university through the headwinds of a global pandemic.

Now on a September morning, Harroz stood on the stage with family, friends and colleagues and accepted the symbols of his office—the presidential collar and mace—with a blend of seriousness and humor.

“Did you see how quickly I handed the mace back to the Faculty Senate chairs?” Harroz asked. “That thing is heavy.” ▶

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After being officially installed as OU's president by Board of Regents Chair Michael Cawley, at right, Harroz receives a standing ovation from those in attendance at the Lloyd Noble Center on Sept. 17.



Harroz receives the symbols of his authority as president: the collar of office, presented by student leaders, and the presidential mace, presented by Faculty Senate leaders.

While clearly enjoying the ceremony, Harroz emphasized that the pageantry of an inauguration is not about the individual, but the institution. “I’m the 15th president of the

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University of Oklahoma, but there will be a 16th and a 17th. When we gather at times like these, it is in no way about the individual.

“These moments are about pausing and rededicating and recommitting ourselves to the reason behind great universities—

the critical nature of what they are and what they do for us.

“What our faculty does is not just transmit knowledge, they create knowledge,” he said.

Reflecting on both the original mission of OU and the vision for its future, Harroz underscored the importance of the university equally serving the individual, the state and society.

Harroz spoke of his father, the youngest of nine children, whose parents had immigrated from Lebanon and met in Oklahoma. Joseph Harroz Sr. was the first in his family to

attend college and, because of his OU education and medical practice, was able to send his own children to college.

“A great university creates the opportunity for those who have the talent, regardless of their means,” said Harroz, noting that 22% of the 2021 freshman class are the first in their families to go to college.

Harroz said that a great university should also propel a state forward by contributing to the health of its people, as OU does through its Health Sciences Center and Tulsa campuses and research-based treatment facilities, like the Stephenson Cancer Center and the Harold Hamm Diabetes Center.

The university should fuel Oklahoma’s economic development through innovation and an educated workforce, he added, noting that OU’s research landscape has progressed tremendously, reaching a record-high \$445.9 million in research awards last fiscal year.

He said the third role of a university is to teach students how to be good citizens and how to become their “better selves.”

“If you don’t understand someone else’s view, political or otherwise, you’re not trying hard enough,” said Harroz. “We need to keep this experiment of democracy moving forward.”

To achieve these goals and mark their progress, Harroz—along with faculty and staff—has created the “Lead On, University” strategic plan. The university’s first such plan in more than 30 years sets transformational goals that include becoming a top-tier public research university; keeping OU affordable and attainable; making the university a place of belonging for all students, staff, faculty and alumni; and making a positive impact on the state and nation through research and creative activity.

“It requires all of us working together toward those common goals and purposes,” Harroz said. “What is the university’s role? We change lives.

“And the debt I have? I can never repay. I was allowed to come here. My father was allowed to come here and if my kids play their hands right, they’ll be allowed to come here—where the stakes are high and the challenges are great and the work is hard. But I know without a doubt we can do it together.”

Harroz said the past 18 months of the pandemic have been among the most challenging in OU’s history, with the possible exception of the Dust Bowl. And yet, he sees plenty of reasons to be optimistic.

“Are we prepared to pass on to the next generation a university better than the one we received? I’m 100% convinced the answer is ‘absolutely yes.’

“I know there are better days ahead.”

