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NAACP Black History Event/Galilee Baptist

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NAACP Black History Event/Galilee Baptist
John M. Dunn
Feb. 12, 2010

- Welcome to this evening's presentation and thank you for your continued focus on Black history and the need to recognize the contributions and accomplishments of every segment of our community.
- Black history--both teaching our students about it and sometimes being a part of it are central to who and what we are at Western Michigan University. Since I've been at WMU, I've defined a healthy university as, among other things, one that is able to focus broadly on diversity and all of its meanings. It's also one that sustains and nurtures its human capital--all of its human capital--in a way that allows each individual to reach his or her full potential.
- That is not a sentiment that is new with my presidency. It is one that dates back to the very beginnings of Western Michigan University. I was reminded of the strong shoulders of earlier presidents on which I stand, two days ago, the Battle Creek Enquirer ran a feature that was really a tribute to one of WMU's great alums, Merze Tate. Here on campus, we know that it was also about the president who stood firm and helped her overcome barriers.
- At a time, in the beginning of the 20th century when few other colleges even paid lip service to the concept of diversity and student access and success, Dwight B. Waldo, WMU's founding president resolved, because of his personal convictions, to ensure that every qualified student, regardless of race, gender or financial background, would have access to a college education and would be able to use that education as a full participant in society.

- Black students quickly learned they were welcome at Western even as they were turned away from other Michigan schools. A gifted young black woman from Battle Creek came to Western in the 1920s because she wanted to be a teacher. She excelled academically, graduating first in her class in just three years and becoming one the first black woman to earn a bachelor's degree from Western. But when it came time for her to find a teaching position, there were no schools in Michigan willing to hire a black woman. Furious at the injustice, Waldo made overtures on her behalf, and he and two other Western administrators loaned their star student the money she needed for a job search out of state. It was a school in Indiana not Michigan that finally offered her a high school teaching position and a start to her career.

- That young woman was Merze Tate—Dr. Merze Tate, and she went on to make history. She became one of the nation's leading authorities on international and diplomatic affairs. A noted historian, researcher, university professor and philanthropist, she earned a master's degree at Columbia, and in 1935, she became the first black woman to graduate from Oxford University in Great Britain. She went on to earn doctoral degrees from both Harvard University, in 1940, and Radcliffe College, in 1941. In 1951, she traveled to India as a Fulbright lecturer and met with Prime Minister Nehru and his daughter Indira Ghandi.

- Tate worked for 35 years as a professor at Howard University before retiring in 1977. And she never forgot the school that jump-started her impressive career. In 1981, she donated \$150,000 to Western Michigan University to establish an information processing center for graduate research. In 1990, she donated \$1 million to start the Merze Tate Student Academic Endowment Fund at WMU.

- She died in 1996 in Washington.

- We honor her and all of the others who came through the doors of WMU and went on to find success and make history. By honoring them and gathering for events such as this evening's we remind ourselves and our students of just what the possibilities are.
- Thank you for holding this event, and thank you for inviting me to be part of it.