



1977: Alex Haley, author of *Roots*, became a board member because “I so much endorse what Berea is that I really want to be a part of it.”

CONVOCATIONS:

By Jay Buckner

“He must have worn about size 36 shoes,” says current convocations coordinator Randall Roberts of his predecessor, Dr. John J. Crowden. As he approaches his second year of coordinating convocations, Roberts wonders, “How am I going to fill these shoes?”

With his long beard, soft-spoken demeanor, and thoughtful responses, Randall Roberts looks the part of a Wise Man, which is a good thing, because some might say coordinating the convocations program—technically a part-time job—requires Biblical effort. You might say Roberts has the largest class on campus when all 1,178 seats unfold and allow the world to be brought to Berea. While he’s teaching two classes each semester in the

general studies program, he coordinates publicity, manages the budget, negotiates contracts, arranges scheduled events, and coordinates endless details (such as sound, lighting, and stage preparation); he often gets up early to drive to Bluegrass Airport in Lexington to meet a speaker arriving at the gate, or return her to the airport. Often he doesn’t get to enjoy the rewards of his hard work because he is attending to backstage issues during convocations.

Roberts learned his task quickly while shadowing Crowden, who taught sociology for 41 years and ran the convocations program for 20 of those years before retiring in June, 2004. Dr. Crowden passed away in December, 2004—a mere six months later.

“One time when I was shadowing John, a dance troupe came, which meant we had a heck of a lot of extra work with lighting and sound,” says Roberts. “I wondered, how is he going to do all that? Incredibly, John arranged it all. I’ll never forget the next morning, sitting down in Phelps Stokes Chapel, and thinking what a magical transformation had taken place.” Like so many of the programs, it’s not the transformation of the stage that’s most impressive, it’s the transformation of attitudes, thoughts, and feelings that result from the performances.

Experiences like this made Roberts a fan of the Berea convocations program long before he began teaching here five

1900s

William Jennings Bryan visits Berea College.



1923

“Oct. 26. Just got back from an athletic performance which was the greatest thing of the kind I ever saw. It was a Danish bunch of twenty-eight, 13 women and 15 men, directed by Neil Backh. I highly resolved tonite that I would supple my old muscles up a bit.”


—Joe Hurt

1924

George Washington Carver speaks at Berea College.



Bringing the World to Berea College

 International Education

Musicians from the Jewish/Arab Cultural Bridging Project, Atzilut, performed a concert for peace at Berea College in 2003.

1940

Robert Frost visits Berea College.



1960s

Convocation speakers included newsman Bill Moyers (below), anthropologist Margaret Mead, historian Arnold Toynbee, and folk singer John Jacob Niles.

Courtesy of The University of Texas at Austin



1975

Civil rights activist and Georgia senator Julian Bond delivered a convocation on "The New Politics." His grandfather, James Bond (below), was an 1892 Berea graduate.



years ago. “I had attended convocations when I was teaching at Eastern Kentucky University in Richmond. Even then I was aware of John Crowden’s dedication, but after working with him I saw that this was a major component of his life.”

For nearly a century, the breadth, diversity, and educational experiences offered by speakers and artists in the sciences, social sciences, the arts, languages, philosophy, and religion have enabled the convocations program to fulfill its purpose to present outstanding personalities who enliven intellectual, aesthetic, and religious life, and who perform an important educational role.

“In the mid-90s when I came to hear the Dalai Lama,” Roberts recalls, “a group of Tibetan monks were also on campus creating a sand painting. That was such a memorable experience. Looking back at all of the convocation calendars, it amazes me.”

The list of lecturers and performers reads like a “Who’s Who” in every major field, including such notables as Julian Bond, (head of the NAACP), Carl Sagan (astronomer), Cal Thomas (columnist), Ralph Nader (consumer rights activist), Margaret Mead (anthropologist), the Dalai Lama (1989 Nobel Peace Prize winner), Morris Dees (co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center), George Washington Carver (agricultural researcher), Rosa Parks (civil rights



The Koresh Dance Company performed for the convocation series during spring term 2004.

leader), Thornton Wilder (playwright), Carl Sandburg (poet), and Bill Monroe (bluegrass musician)—the list goes on and on.

Historically, convocations at Berea began as early as 1902, when they were known as The Lyceum, or chapel, and were required three times a week. Under the Day Law when interracial classrooms were forbidden, President Hutchins brought such outstanding African American speakers and performers to campus as Dr. George Washington Carver, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and poet James Weldon Johnson who, according to reports at the time, held his audience “in the hollow of his hand with Go down, Death, and Crucifixion, and after that they belonged to him forever...that

day’s lesson, having been written upon each soul.”

Each semester students must attend at least seven of the weekly convocations. In the last few years convocations have included such international musical ensembles as Imani Winds, an innovative woodwind quintet that explores the links between European, African, Latin, and American music, and Eboo Patel, director of the Interfaith Youth Core in Chicago.

Convocations are intended to reflect the mission of the College and give students a chance to confront social issues or have diverse cultural experiences. With convocations, Roberts says, “we try to present experiences that students might not have otherwise, due to financial or geographical limitations. At convo,

1970s

Alex Haley was a convocation speaker in 1966 and delivered the commencement address in 1985.



1980s

Maya Angelou visited Berea in 1968 and again in the late 1980s.



1984

John Stockwell, a former CIA agent in Vietnam, discussed his book *The Secret Wars of the CIA*.



Lindsay Bruner, '06

Randall Roberts (second from left) speaks with members of the Chris Norman Ensemble after their convocation.

students have the chance to watch and listen to performing artists who are known worldwide.”

Berea College has gained a well-respected reputation for its strong commitment to the success of the program. In fact, a number of other colleges have looked to us for inspiration. “Other colleges contacted John and modeled their convocations program after ours,” says Roberts. “They recognized the opportunity for their campus and community to bring in speakers who are engaging, controversial, and present really good educational ideas.”

Roberts works closely with faculty on the convocations committee, and he

continues to encourage staff and faculty to attend and integrate convocation topics into the curriculum. “An important aspect of convocations is to work in conjunction with my colleagues and programs on campus,” Roberts says, “so that each enhances the other.”

Memorial funds, in addition to department monies, provide the necessary capital to contract with internationally known speakers. Honoring the impact John had on countless “students” both at Berea and in the community, the John Crowden Memorial Convocation Fund has been established to help continue the legacy of lifelong learning. Jackie



In 2004 John Crowden retired after teaching 41 years at the College.

Crowden, John’s wife who worked as the music secretary for 32 years, says that John Crowden devoted his life to the convocations program. “Wherever John went, his love and respect for the College came along like an overcoat,” she said. “He thought these events were very much integral to the College’s mission of a broad-spectrum education. He saw these as opportunities for students to get a taste of something else, other than what they were majoring in.” Contributions to the convocation fund can be made through the development office.

Oh, and just for the record, John Crowden—who was a most graceful and accomplished dancer—wore size ten-and-a-half shoes.

1987

Carl Sagan spoke at the rededication of the science building.



1994

After President Stephenson’s death, convocations speaker, the Dalai Lama, requested the burning of butter lamps in Buddhist temples to honor President Stephenson.



2001

Entertainer, teacher and activist Holly Near performed at Phelps Stokes Chapel.

