

Erskine Bowles
NC Press Association North Carolinian of the Year Award Response
Dean Smith Center
March 18, 2010

[Award presented by NCPA President David Woronoff after a brief tribute video.]

Wow. What can I say? When I watch something like that, I can't help but think about when these young folks come to see me, and they've got some big problem or they have suffered some setback or big defeat, I tell them, "Hey man, you've come to the right place. I'm the guy who's been rejected by millions of people."

When David called and told me I had been chosen to receive this very special award from the Press Association, I was really happy, but I was also really surprised—*incredulous*. You know the list of past winners includes some of my biggest heroes—really great leaders like Bill Friday, Billy Graham, Jim Hunt, and even Dean Smith.

But I swear, when I watch that glowing video and hear all those kind words, I'm a little mixed-up. Because this guy you are honoring tonight *can't* be the same hard-headed Erskine Bowles I've been reading about on the front pages of your newspapers over the past year or so. No way! I feel like my 2-year-old grandson did when he looked up and saw me on the NBC News recently, and he yelled at his Mama, "POP is Erskine Bowles!" I assure you I am more Pop than I am Erskine Bowles.

You know, when I was about 16, I saw my Dad get a big award like this one in Winston-Salem. I was sitting in the audience with my two sisters waiting for him to give his acceptance speech. He walked up to the microphone and he said, "Thank you. This means a lot to me." But then he said, "I don't want you to judge me based on what *I've* done." And then he looked at my sisters and me, and he said, "I want you to judge me based on what my *children* do for others." And that was, like, wow!

But my Dad really believed that. He believed he was a product of the values and opportunities that he had been given by his parents—and that all he had accomplished was directly attributable to those values and the wonderful education he had received right here at UNC—at this University he loved so much. He used to tell us how in the Old Days, everybody would go out and chop wood to keep their own families warm through the winter, but then they would always throw a few logs on the woodpile for the community.

He always said all of us had a responsibility to add to that proverbial woodpile. And he stressed that it didn't matter what your financial circumstances were or what your politics were, he felt all of us in our own way could do our part to make this world a better place. And that's what my sisters and brother and I have tried to do in our own individual ways.

Of all the opportunities I have been blessed to have in public service, without a doubt, serving the people of North Carolina as president of this University will always be the greatest privilege of my professional life. I can't imagine another job that I would enjoy as much or that would offer me such an extraordinary opportunity to have a positive impact on the citizens of our state. (I just wish I'd thought of that *before* I spent \$10 million trying to get elected to the U.S. Senate.)

More than four years ago—in my very first Board meeting as President and again in my inaugural address—I laid out an ambitious set of goals and objectives for operating this University more efficiently and effectively, for strengthening K-12, for fostering a seamless relationship with our great community colleges, for ensuring access and affordability, for improving retention and graduation rates, and for expanding and focusing our research and outreach.

As our team has worked toward each of these goals, I have continually asked myself: Are we heading in the right direction? Are we making progress in meeting the needs of North Carolina? Are we doing all we can to make sure our citizens have the knowledge and skills they will need to compete in this new world of work? Do we have the right goals and objectives, and if so, do we have the right people on the bus in the right seats, and are they timely executing on our plan?

I truly believe the University has made real headway on all these fronts—even in a period of dwindling financial resources. We have tried to get the job done in as open, candid, and transparent a manner as possible. I know we've been far, far from perfect, but no \$8-billion organization is. And while I don't think you and I will ever agree on such important issues as open vs. closed searches for chancellors, my personal goal and expectation of myself and our staff has been to be as straightforward and transparent as possible in all that we do.

We have a real *treasure* in the University of North Carolina. We also have a real responsibility not just to maintain our well-deserved reputation for quality and value—but to improve upon it—and *earn* every day the right to be recognized as the best public university system in America. I think it's also fair to say that as a public University, we must be held accountable in all we do—good or bad—for better or for worse.

As you all know so well, the press has neither agreed with nor supported all we have done since I've been at the University—and rightly so. The University and I have been called on the carpet when you felt we weren't living up to the people's high expectations of their public University—and I'm good with that. In fact, I think it's 100% right. I would actually say that in most instances, we should have done better and deserved the criticism. In a few cases, maybe not. But by and large, absolutely.

Not too long ago, I was watching the *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer, and at the end of the program he shared a set of guidelines that he described as a sort of professional creed he had tried to live by as a journalist. That creed included guidelines like:

- Do nothing I cannot defend.
- Cover, write, and present every story with the care I would want if the story were about me.
- Assume there is at least one other side or version to every story.
- Assume the viewer is as smart and as caring and as good a person as I am. Assume the same about all people on whom I report.

- Assume personal lives are a private matter, until a legitimate turn in the story absolutely mandates otherwise.
- Carefully separate opinion from straight news, and clearly label everything.
- Do not use anonymous sources or blind quotes, except on rare and monumental occasions. No one should ever be allowed to attack another anonymously.

That may be the “perfect world” version of journalism, but when I heard Jim Lehrer say this, it reminded me of some other advice I had received. I thought when I heard this list, that it sounded a whole lot like the good, common-sense, decent advice I got from my Dad during his lifetime—and that I *still*, thank goodness, get from Bill Friday. These two truly good, decent men gave me my own creed to work by:

1. Be open.
2. Be transparent.
3. Never forget it’s the *people’s* University.
4. Stick to the facts.
5. When you make a mistake—and we all do—admit it, correct it, learn from it, and move on.
6. Surround yourself with pictures of your kids—those you love. Think about what *they* would think of you if they heard each conversation that you have in your office.
7. Keep a picture in your office of folks who didn’t have the advantages you did and remember they deserve the same opportunities that your own kids have been able to have.

In serving as President of this treasure we call UNC, I’ve tried to keep this advice in the front of my mind. I have always felt that if I did these things that really mattered, I would not only be honoring and building upon the legacy of my hero, Bill Friday, but when I left the University I would surely leave it better than I found it upon my arrival. Just like the wisdom offered to you by Jim Lehrer, the wise words of Bill Friday and Skipper Bowles have kept me on the path to progress.

Now, while I plan to retire and to return home to Charlotte for good in December, I feel today the same way I did at the end of my last political debacle. I don’t know what specifically lies ahead, but I do know that I still plan to throw a few more logs on that community woodpile before I’m done. But tonight, on behalf of my parents and my mentors, I thank you for this enormous honor.