



## 8th Dillard University Presidential Investiture Address

**Rochelle L. Ford, Ph.D., APR**

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First giving honor to God, the source of my strength, my life, my future, and **our Dillard University future.**

Thank you, Chairman Jones and all of the members of the Board of Trustees for the trust you have put in me to lead.

Thank you to my cabinet colleagues, staff and faculty - our Dillard University team.

Thank you, platform guests, government officials, fellow presidents and chancellors, academic and learned society delegates, alumni delegates, student delegates, marshals, ushers, volunteers, our choir, our distinguished honorary inauguration committee, and our campus inauguration committee for making this a wonderful occasion.

Thank you to my friends, our alumni, our guests and Dillard community for being here today.

A special thank you to all of our Dillard University students for having faith in Dillard and trusting that Dillard will continue to activate on our commitment to cultivate you into even better, stronger leaders who live ethically, think and communicate precisely and act courageously to make the world a better place.

I also appreciate all of the warm greetings, cards and warm wishes I have received from those who were unable to be here with us this afternoon.

While you've heard many things today about my past, I want you to know that I am also just Rochelle, or Shelly as many of my family and friends call me. I am a woman, a sinner, saved by grace who messes up and blows it on a regular basis, but I have been given grace and mercy and another opportunity to get back up **and try again to make things better and to be better as a servant leader, teacher, colleague, friend, daughter and mother.**

So, I thank you for entrusting me as your academic-community partner, colleague, leader and 8<sup>th</sup> president of Dillard University.

Being my authentic self who is a Gen Xer and a former valley girl sounding teen from Ohio, I must say "OMG isn't this is crazy!" – meaning exciting, humbling and amazing – that today I was installed as the 8<sup>th</sup> president of Fair Dillard University.



But seriously, I am energized by the community Dillard has established. I'm prepared, having leaned into my curiosity to learn about Dillard and its legacy. I'm optimistic about our future together, and therefore, I have already begun to activate on my commitment to live the oath I just took, and you witnessed.

Will you join me on this journey to continue to make Dillard even better than it is today?

Activating on our commitment.

This commitment to be excellent, to become stronger through our faith is evidenced through all that the university staff, faculty and students accomplished since Straight and New Orleans Universities were established in 1869 and later joined together in 1930 to become Dillard University. The previous 7 Dillard presidents accomplished so much.

Most recently Dr. Walter M. Kimbrough grew the endowment to over \$103 million and ensured that Dillard could withstand hurricanes, cyber-attacks and Covid-19. **Later in 2023, we will relaunch** his "Brain Food" lecture series, under the new name of "**Cultivating Leadership**," where outstanding national, local and global leaders will share their leadership journeys with students, and we will share it publicly through "snackable" multimedia content.

Before the "Hip Hop Prez," Dr. Marvelene Hughes led Dillard through the most trying and nearly devastating time - Hurricane Katrina. If you can imagine or recall, every building on our campus was literally five feet underwater, except the chapel where we are today. President Hughes and the Dillard community let the world know that nothing can turn our university around. She launched our first capital campaign and reopened the university. **This fall**, we strengthened our emergency preparedness partnerships with Centenary College in Shreveport, Alabama State University in Montgomery and the Department of Homeland Security.

Before the first female president, Dr. Hughes, took the helm, **President Michael Lomax** expanded Dillard's enrollment to more than 2000 students, expanded our facilities, and helped Dillard become ranked in the top 20 schools in the South. Thank you, Dr. Lomax, for your leadership of Dillard and the UNCF and for your encouragement to me and so many other leaders. Thank you for being here with me today. **With the renewed support** of UNCF, Student Freedom Initiative and Complete College America, we continue to transform Dillard into a more effective and efficient - excellent university.

Before President Lomax, Dr. Samuel DuBois Cook recommitted Dillard to social justice and intellectual pursuit as he founded the National Center for Black Jewish Relations and the Japanese Studies Program. **Last week, we reinstated the National Center for Black Jewish Relations**, and in March we will be sending 10 physics students to **Shibaura Institute of Technology** in Japan to study in their engineering labs and SIT's students will study English at Dillard.



Before President Cook, Dr. Albert W. Dent led Dillard for 28 years through World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, and he was known for making capital improvements with four buildings constructed under his leadership. **Tomorrow, we will celebrate the beginning of our construction planning of a new living learning serving community** located on Norman Meyer Ave. made possible by the US Department of Education.

Preceding President Dent, Dr. Broadus Butler, Dillard's 2nd president, focused on liberal arts education. **This fall 2022, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded us a \$700,000 grant** to develop our humanistic Food Studies curricula, research opportunities, and public communication on African American and Indigenous foodways. Likewise, this fall Dillard **received a \$1.3 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education** for Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement Program, to strengthen our support services helping eligible Dillard students to pursue graduate education leading to doctoral degrees. Thank you, Dr. Zella Palmer and Ms. Traci Thomas, for leading these grant efforts.

Like me, Dillard's first president was a Howard University graduate. Dr. William Stuart Nelson set the University's liberal arts direction through “cultural enlightenment and participation.” **In January, we renewed** our membership as a Project Pericles University and became a member of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education to enhance our commitment to service and liberal arts that **results in career success.**

Friends, I promise to build off of the legacies and lessons of these former presidents, and I promise to sustain the university like our interim presidents Rev. Will W. Alexander, Dr. Myron Wicke, Dr. Bettye Parker Smith, and Dr. James E. Lyons Sr. did. Drs. Parker-Smith and Lyons, thank you for your support as I transitioned into this presidency.

#### *Activating on our Commitment*

I draw confidence and courage from those leaders. Just as I did as a child growing up in Gahanna, Ohio from my parents.

I feel so blessed to have my mother, children, nieces and nephew, sister-in-law and extended family here today. Would y'all please stand? I learned at home that we must treat others the way – or even better than – we want to be treated; then the world will be better. I have confidence that we can keep moving forward. I move forward to honor and support you. I love y'all. You can be seated.

Lord knows how much I wish my daddy -- Raymond E. Tillery -- and my brother --Raymond Tillery, Jr. -- could be here today. Both of them passed away in 2019. As many of you know, I was a daddy's girl wanting to implement lessons daddy taught me pushing me to be better, and I was often chasing to achieve similar things as my big brother did. Both of them were members of Omega Psi Phi fraternity, and I am so thankful that their brothers are here today. I learned from



my brother and dad, that friendship is essential to the soul and that we must stay committed to scholarship, service and uplifting others. I learned those attributes by watching them and their brothers have a lot of fun **and activate** on their commitment.

I found those same qualities through my sorority Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc. that scholarship, service and sisterhood are essential **but so is being a finer woman**. Sorors, will you please stand. Like Dillard University, we are not the largest sorority, but we are mighty. Like Dillard, we have made a global impact while working with our constitutionally-bond brothers of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Inc. **We activate on our commitment**. Sorors, you may be seated.

It was at Howard University, where I knew I loved communications and I fell in love with being a part of a historically Black university. That's where I met my Howard University mom – Dr. Barbara Hines, who believed in me as a first-year student and helped me become a leader in the Public Relations Student Society of America. She supported me with my undergraduate, masters and doctoral theses, and supported me in applying for every job I have ever had including Dillard University. She introduced me to so many of the professionals who have become **mentors, sponsors and coaches**. I love you, honor you and want you to know there would be no President Ford without a Dr. Hines. Could you please stand? She activated on her commitment to historically Black college and universities, and I will activate on my commitment to mentor others and to support Dillard and HBCUs. You can be seated.

Studying and serving help prepare us for our careers and hopefully our calling – like for me teaching and serving others. At the same time, supervisors and professional colleagues provide us with opportunities to enrich our journey like Dr. Robert Smith, my first dean while I was an instructor at University of Tennessee at Martin. He's **still my coach** and pushed me to apply for this presidency. He is working today in his new role as the interim executive director of The Tennessee Higher Education Commission and couldn't be in New Orleans, **but** he is watching this service live-streamed via our partnership **with Urban Edge Network, the media partner of the Gulf Coast Athletic Conference** – Download the HBCU League Pass Plus App.

I also must acknowledge Elon University's president Connie Ledoux Book, a Louisiana native, who nominated me for the Clark Atlanta University HBCU Executive Leadership Program, which is led by Dr. Phyllis Dawkins --former Dillard Provost and former Bennett President. Chancellor Kent Syverrud gave me the opportunity to lead Syracuse University's Middle State Accreditation and its student experience strategic plan implementation team. Thank you, President Book, Dr. Dawkins and Chancellor Syverrud, as **these experiences** shaped my understanding of higher education, and **this knowledge** will help make our Dillard community better - as we activate our commitment to excellence.



### *Excellence Without Excuse*

Thank you, Dr. Jannette L. Dates and the Annenberg Honors Program for promoting that phrase – Excellence Without Excuse. From my visits with **Dillard University alumni** virtually and at events across the nation, I have learned that **Fair Dillard** has produced excellence, because we **have always been an inclusive community** where staff and faculty know your name and encourage you to be better. I promise to ensure our current and future students have amazing experiences students too that will help cultivate them into leaders.

Experiences like Kalaya Sibley class of 2022 is having. She has interned in Washington D.C., has been reproductive health advocate who was quoted and featured in the Washington Post, is a current White House HBCU fellow and is the 2022 AT&T Rising Future Maker.

Experiences like Dr. Ruth Simmons, class of 1967, had. She completed undergraduate research at Dillard and became the first Black woman president of an Ivy League University and is completing her service as president of Prairie View A&M University. Thank you for the Simmons family's endowed gifts to Dillard over the years and for being a role model for me and other women presidents.

Experiences like Adrian Guy Anderson '01 had. She participated in the Melton Foundation Fellowship allowing her to complete a global research project and go on to UVA for law school and later return to Dillard to raise funds for the university as a development officer. This weekend's inaugurations activities were paid for 100% by sponsors and donors. Thank you, inauguration team!

BUT also experiences like Kaleb Gibson and Brandon Dickerson are having. Both are first year students who ran for Dillard's royal court and are members of Dillard's inaugural baseball team. They along with 36 other baseball players are cultivating leadership skills on the field, while conducting more community service hours than any other team. Our Baseball team is traveling to **their first game today!**

**What if we activated on our commitment** so that **all** Dillard University students graduate having completed at least three of these experiences like study away, undergraduate research, internships, and service. Let's **help our students think** about and **articulate clearly** how their Dillard and other life experiences have helped cultivate them into leaders who are ready enter private and public sectors with innovative spirits.

I have seen the work of **staff** in shaping our students as leaders, their activation on their commitment has a positive ROI -- Return On Investment. I have witnessed our **faculty leading our community to address key issues** through their teaching, scholarship and service. I know that Dillard University **can continue** to make its mark in many areas, but I believe we are uniquely suited to contribute significantly to six areas – will you be our partner:



1. Addressing **mental and physical health equity** issues. We have begun through our Center for Minority Health Equity, Dillard's new master's in nursing programs; other undergraduate programs including nursing, social work, psychology, public health and health administration and **our free community health fair tomorrow on campus**.
2. Improving **food equity** by ending food deserts and food insecurities through the expansion of our Ray Charles Center for Material Culture, our interdisciplinary food studies program, partnerships with Sodexo, and our community outreach like our free food box distributions with Lighthouse Ministries and AARP Urban Garden at Bethany UMC.
3. Investing in **innovation and sustainability** through research and study in STEM, social sciences, business and humanities programs and the partnerships we have with NASA, H2The Future, local schools, GNO Inc. and other federal, state and local partners.
4. Improving **digital communication, broadband and cyber security** through our mobile cell tower, our internet and mobile courses for senior citizens, partnerships with Cisco, and our computer science, award winning film, theater, music, English and mass communication programs.
5. Leading **economic development and entrepreneurship** programs like we're doing through incubating local businesses, teaching entrepreneurship and business courses, and offering financial literacy programming for our students, alumni and community; and.
6. Creating **safer and more equitable communities** like we are doing through the Center for Racial Justice; evening, weekend and online degree programs; summer and weekend youth programs, and our pre-law program, urban studies, economics, health and other academic programs.

We can do this **together** by activating on our commitment:

-- **With facilities that withstand the forecast** – Dillard can be known as a **sustainability leader through living, learning, and serving communities**

-- We can **fortify our staff and faculty** to help them have innovative curriculum and programs that **meet societal needs** through professional development, undergraduate and graduate degrees, K-12 programs and community programs delivered in an effective and efficient manner.

-- We must continue to **finance the future** so that **all** future students whether in community programs, traditional undergraduate or new graduate programs can achieve their dreams of being leaders cultivated through Dillard, with worrying about funding.

We can only achieve our goals **if we collectively activate** on our commitment to Dillard University and to each other.



Giving of our **time** like you've done today in supporting each other, supporting me, supporting our future.

Giving of our **talent** like the amazing young people from St. Aug. who presented the colors, our students who have sung, and like Donna Renella from New York who has given pro bono consulting serves to help our human resources team.

Giving of our **treasure** like those who have endowed scholarships, made donations on giving Tuesday and **WILL give financially TODAY.**

**Why give time, talent and treasure?**

- Because we **recognize** that Dillard has delivered excellence in the past,
- Because we want **to encourage** our students, faculty and to keep their faith, remain strong and courageous.
- Because we **know** we will get a strong return on our investment.
- Because we **care** about Dillard's future and are confident that together with this 8<sup>th</sup> president,

We will collectively deliver excellence in the future.

**Join me in Activating on Our Commitment to Dillard.** Thank you.