

SPECIAL REMARKS

By

**Her Excellency Ellen Johnson Sirleaf
President of the Republic of Liberia
And Visitor of the University of Liberia**

At the

**Special Convocation for the Inauguration of
Ophelia Inez Weeks, PhD**

As the 14th President of the University of Liberia

Wednesday, September 13, 2017

University of Liberia Fendell Campus

The Vice President of the Republic of Liberia;
The Speaker, the Senate President Pro-Tempore and Honorable
Members of the National Legislature;
Your Honors, the Chief Justice, Justices of the Supreme Court and
Members of the Judiciary;
The Dean and Members of the Cabinet and other officials of
Government;
The Doyen and Members of the Diplomatic Corps;
The UNSRSG and Heads of UN Agencies and Int'l Organizations;
Special Guests;
The Chairman and Members of the Board of Trustees;
Dr. Ophelia Inez Weeks, 14th President of the University of Liberia;
Dr. Emmett Dennis, 13th President and other former Presidents of
the University of Liberia;
Heads of other Universities and Colleges;
The University of Liberia Council;
The Faculty and Staff of the University;
Mr. President and Members of the UL Alumni Association;
The Clergy;
Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen;
My dear Students:

I am exceedingly glad to be at this yet another very important Convocation where I am honored to participate in the inauguration ceremony of a President of the University of Liberia. Nine years ago, I was pleased to inaugurate Dr. Emmet Dennis, a distinguished Liberian scientist and academic of international repute as President of the University of Liberia.

At that time in 2008, the University was not so famous and for all the wrong reasons in the aftermath of more than 14 years of war. On the campuses were visible signs of the destruction of physical plants and academic and support units. The human capital of the University had depleted to the extent that the academic profile dropped to a very low ebb.

As we struggled with corruption in public service, the University displayed shameless descent in human values of civility and integrity. Stories were prevalent of unqualified young people being admitted as students and unscrupulous individuals wearing academics awarding undeserving grades to students through fraudulent means.

Student riots and faculty protests were frequent and unpredictable. There was also very low budgetary support. Yet, Dr. Dennis accepted to take on the unenviable task of uncertainty and multiple challenges, leaving his life of comfortable retirement from a successful and proud career at Rutgers University in the United States to serve his nation, particularly to help mend the war-broken youth of our country and give them hope in the rebirth of our nation.

Dr. Dennis set off with a clear vision focusing on four pillars: 1. Restoring integrity and civility; 2. Faculty and staff Development; 3. Curricular transformation and restoration of libraries and laboratories; and, 4. Developing an IT infrastructure including digitization of student records. In doing so, the University established external institutional collaborations as a means of complementing the government's support for the development of academic programs and infrastructure.

As sign of government's commitment to making good on its responsibility to the national flagship university, we gradually increased budgetary support from 1million US dollars when I assumed office in 2006 to a peak of US\$14million by FY 2013, a 1400%. We are proud that the FY 17/18 budget is over US\$16 million. Despite the other crushing demands, particularly to improve the quality of education at the lower levels. The serious economic downturn and other challenges of the past few years did not spare the University, but we marvel at the progress that has been made as manifested more vividly by the calm, regularity and predictability of

campus life among students and among faculty members; and above all, the progress in integrity, civility and academic capacity and growth.

As Dr. Dennis passes the baton on, I wish to thank him and his team of administrative and academic colleagues, the Board of Trustees and the students of this University for this tremendous progress. Thank you Professor Weade Kobbah-Wureh and colleagues and others before you who were reliable support to Dr. Dennis. We know that Dr. Weeks who became a part of that diligent group will be accorded the same level of support.

My second and very last inauguration of a University of Liberia President in my role as Visitor is what we have just done by crowning Professor Ophelia Inez Weeks. Like her predecessor, Dr. Weeks comes to head this University from an exceptionally rich background of service, science and academia. I have found that she is very mindful that there is plenty work still left to be done, and that the comfortable and stable academic life at Florida International University and the United States generally are a far cry from life back home. By accepting this challenging duty, I can only say with pride that Dr. Ophelia Inez Weeks is truly a strong and brave woman, a real patriot and a bearer of a family tradition of service to this University and to country.

We recall that Dr. Weeks grew up on the Capitol Hill Campus –in the famous Richardson Cottage - where her father, Dr. Rocheforte L. Weeks lived and worked, from 1959 to 1971 as the 3rd President and first Liberian President of the University of Liberia. Thus, she is the first child of a former President of the University to serve in similar position.

The other extraordinary thing that I wish to recall on this occasion is the fact that Dr. Weeks is taking this mantle as the second woman to rise to this position. In 1978, Dr. Mary Antoinette Hope Grimes

Brown Sherman made history when she was the first woman to be inaugurated as President of this University and the first woman to be President/Vice Chancellor/Head of a major institution of higher learning in Africa. Mary Antoinette was a trail blazer, a great woman of courage, knowledge and purpose. Her origins were of humble Vai motherhood and a father from background of privilege. Yet she chose academia beginning in 1950 as a teaching staff in the Teachers College, rising to the Presidency that ended in 1984 when she refused to accept the interference of the then military government in the academic life and running of the University.

Mary Antoinette gave many of us then younger women in Africa hope that we could break barriers set against women on academic, social, economic and political journeys. I must reminisce that aside from her brains there was beauty and style in her everyday African attire away from western dress. Her greatest legacy at this university is academic freedom, protection of faculty and student rights, protection of the University from government interference and scholarship and quality education. Her products are among some of the gem today in Liberian and African academic and political leadership. Her academic team were also amongst some of the best brains our country had to offer. These noble patriots include Dr Amos Sawyer, Dr Patrick Sayon, Dr James Teah Tarpeh, Dr. Togba Nah Tipoteh.

This is why I reiterate that the Fendall Campus of this University be named the Mary Antoinette Brown Sherman Campus, a decision that I ask you, President Weeks, to formalize at the earliest.

From the time that the University of Liberia was chartered by the National Legislature just four years after the founding of our country as the first independent Republic in Africa, and from the time in 1862 when Liberia College opened as the oldest institution of higher learning in West Africa, there have been several leaders – President Joseph Jenkins Roberts, Edward Wilmot Blyden included - whose

legacies must inspire you. But Dr. Weeks, you readily have on hand those of your father, Mary Antoinette and Emmett.

Of course I must encourage you to never forget that this University was established to, among other goals, become a “center of learning with high academic standards which is dedicated to the pursuit, promotion and dissemination of knowledge with emphasis on practical knowledge which is immediately useful to economic, social and cultural development needs.”

Dr Weeks, you have dreamed big and those dreams have come through.

Congratulations and God bless you.