

## **President Rose's Remarks for the April 20 Ceremony on the Commons**

Last Monday the work week began as others. Windy, rainy and cool following a final reminder of winter, but as the day unfolded we quickly realized that the week would be unlike any other.

As the news of a madman's horrific actions reached us, we were all numbed by the ghastly consequences of his hatred. We were instantly filled with questions. Appropriately, our first thoughts were about our own family members, friends and associates in Blacksburg. Were they safe and physically all right?

But then we were faced with the early gruesome images of the morning's events. We saw the visible evidence of the pain, injury and death inflicted by the bullets of spewing anger unleashed by one man.

Our second thoughts then turned to those innocent figures trapped in the line of fire, and to their loved ones. Students and faculty, the young and enthused and the experienced and wise – talent, knowledge, intellect, skills – humanity's best, shot down, and in an instant stripped from the world. Their physical being gone in a flash.

But much more than the qualities they possessed, they were someone's daughter, brother, father, niece, grandchild. They were loved souls taken away without the privilege of a "goodbye."

Anger and compassion, two powerful emotional forces, simultaneously enveloped our feelings. How could it happen? Why did it happen? So many lives trumped by evil and erupted violence.

As the week went on we learned more about how and why. The facts have provided little consolation. We wonder aloud how such a troubled individual could move through the normal rights of passage with such abnormal thoughts and behaviors. We will undoubtedly learn more about the young man so overcome by demons.

However, it is my hope that we not devote the preponderance of our thoughts to him but to the families of those who were injured or whose lives were lost. They need our love and support. They need emotional and spiritual reinforcement of the kind that can only emerge from genuine caring, and they need our respect for their privacy as they grieve.

They need to remember the special features, accomplishments and attributes of their daughter, brother, father, niece, grandchild. They need consolation and they need hope.

That will come as it almost always does from their faith and from those close to a family. But, we need to make our individual and collective support known for these families from afar. My heart has been uplifted by the selfless outpouring of interest we have witnessed from the JMU community and from around the country. Let me just say how proud I am of those at JMU who have reached out.

My own thoughts have also been with President Steger this week. I can only imagine how I would feel if it was JMU students and faculty who were so cruelly ambushed.

Though I am a Virginia Tech graduate, having worked at JMU for 31 years, my institutional loyalties shifted to this institution long ago. For example, I cannot remember when I stopped wearing my Virginia Tech ring. But, I put it on proudly this morning!

The maroon and orange ribbon I wear today didn't come from a Hokie alum or a JMU staff member, but from the provost at the University of Texas – Pan American. Some of you who read my reflections on the University's website know that I was in Texas much of this week chairing an accreditation visit. At our exit interview, he handed the ribbon to me from an overflowing plastic bag. He had them for distribution to others in Edinburg, Texas, but he knew it would hold special meaning for me.

I think his gesture is but a symbol of the supportive efforts we will see demonstrated all over this nation. I hope that such efforts do not end with the all too eminent close of a semester, because the grief of **so** many will not subside **so** quickly.

While today is set aside to support the Hokie nation, I know fully well that many students, and their loved ones, at JMU and at other colleges and universities throughout the land have another emotion crowding those feelings of compassion and anger. There is fear, or at least anxiety, - fear for one's own safety.

I cannot promise you a safe haven. No university president can, and if he/she did it would be a shallow assurance. I can tell you that I am confident about the policies and procedures we have in place to foster a safe and secure learning environment, and I can tell you that I am reassured by the knowledge that we have a comprehensive crisis management plan established, and finally, I am able to say to you that we have a professional and responsible staff that is trained and prepared to serve you in the event that the unthinkable occurs at JMU.

Like other campuses, we will learn from the misfortune of our sister institution, Virginia Tech. We will study our preventative measures and our response plan. We will invite and listen to suggestions, and we will take advantage of emerging technologies. We will be better.

But, all of that said, we have a responsibility to each other to guard our safety. Our open campus and our open society is not assured by a professional police force, nor a response plan that anticipates every eventuality.

Our safety is a privilege that can only be protected by our own observation and vigilance. Abnormal actions and behaviors need to be addressed before they are manifested in acts of violence against oneself or others. I don't suggest paranoia or over-reaction, but simply responsibility as engaged citizens in our communities.

We also share a responsibility to care for those who need our support as a consequence of Monday's tragedy. Anxiety, remorse and a sense of vulnerability are **normal** emotions and our Counseling staff is prepared to assist those who are in need. If you or a friend would benefit from a supportive listener, or a nurturing voice of reassurance I urge you to reach out to our staff.

The days ahead, particularly, next Monday will be difficult and challenging for all of those associated with Virginia Tech, but those days will be made easier as a result of the outpouring of support from friends and colleagues. To everyone here and around our campus who has responded let me say "thank you," as your president and as a Virginia Tech alum. Again, I am so proud of your efforts!

Let me close with an email I received just this morning:

*Dr. Rose,*

*I'm a senior communications and public relations major here at Tech and received word of your ceremony through my brother who is in his first year there.*

*On behalf of the entire student body here, I just wanted to express my gratitude to you and all of your wonderful students there... I can't tell you how moving it was to call a friend there Tuesday night and hear my "Let's go Hokies" cheers in the background... it brought the first smile to my face I've had in days.*

*The amount of support your university is providing truly pours deeply and directly into the student's spirits here and helps more than anyone may ever know. I imagine your schedule for tomorrow's noon ceremony is pretty tight, but if possible, I would love to briefly express my thanks to the student body there on behalf of everyone here.*

*Brice Bradford*