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Centenary inaugurates 1st Black president, its 15th leader in 156-year history

By Kurt Bresswein



New Centenary University President Dale Caldwell was inaugurated as the Hackettstown school's 15th, and first Black, president on Saturday, Oct. 21, 2023.

In remarks Saturday challenging global and national strife and a war on higher education, new Centenary University President Dale Caldwell said he started his day with a decidedly local focus.

Caldwell was inaugurated during an afternoon ceremony as the Hackettstown school's 15th president, and the first who is Black.

But beforehand, he joined the Centenary University community in service initiatives at local nonprofits, including Hackettstown Clean, Trinity Church, First Presbyterian Church, Habitat for Humanity ReStore and the Centenary University food pantry.

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"It's been a wonderful day," he said during his inaugural address. "If you know me, that's what matters is the difference you make."

The university trustees' choice as president arrived at Centenary in eastern Warren County in July. He succeeds Bruce Murphy, who retired with the end of his contract June 30. Murphy had announced his departure in September 2022, before tragically losing his wife in a hit-and-run crash in January in town.

Caldwell, who was introduced Saturday by daughter Ashley in a keynote address, grew up in a family dedicated to racial and economic justice, according to Centenary. His father, a Methodist minister, marched with and personally knew the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and Caldwell followed his late father into the ministry — serving as pastor of Covenant United Methodist Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

Most recently, he had chaired the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Advisory Council at Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he was also executive director of the Rothman Institute of Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Centenary said. He has also served as deputy commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs and is a longtime member and current president of the New Brunswick Board of Education. He is a graduate of Princeton University and earned an MBA from The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and a doctorate from Seton Hall University.

Students who also helped introduce him Saturday called him an inspiration for participants in Centenary's ENACTUS (Entrepreneurial Action Us) program and in-house community consulting group that is available to help local businesses.

"I want you to imagine the heights we can reach with this incredible man as our president," said graduate student Jenna Glinko, who also earned her bachelor's at Centenary.

Board of Trustees Chairwoman Rochelle Makela-Goodman touched on Centenary's history, championed by the Methodist Church at its founding in 1867 and with a rich history of inclusion. It welcomed women from its founding, and admitted students of minority descent decades before most American institutions of higher education, she said.

Now assistant vice president for gift planning at Oregon Health & Science University, she said she's come to appreciate what she called Centenary's transformative role in preparing individuals for productive lives, fulfilling careers, community service and leadership.

"I've come to know we cannot take the gift of education and the gift of Centenary for granted," Makela-Goodman said.

Caldwell presented higher education at a crossroads.

The U.S. Supreme Court in June struck down affirmative action in college admissions, declaring race cannot be a factor and forcing institutions of higher education to look for new ways to achieve diverse student bodies.

In a society consumed with celebrity culture, young people are being told they don't need a college education, Caldwell accused.

He listed a litany of ills, from global wars to a domestic mental health crisis, that he said require intellectuals with a lifelong love of learning to combat.

"I truly believe that higher education is the last, best hope for addressing or bringing to light the major challenges facing the world," he said.

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In a statement ahead of Saturday's inauguration, Caldwell said: "This is a pivotal moment for higher education leaders across the nation. Studies have demonstrated that adults with a college degree earn up to \$1.5 million more during their lifetimes than high school graduates.

"At the same time, public confidence in the value of a college degree has fallen to historically low levels. It's a serious disconnect — and it's clear that higher education is at a crossroads requiring bold leadership.

"My presidency at Centenary will address these challenges head on and establish this University as a transformative national model that take students from economic challenge to intellectual brilliance."

He announced an \$8 million, two-year campaign at Centenary to make the case for college and ensure every family has a chance to send a student there regardless of financial circumstances.

Caldwell's goal is for Centenary to become one of the most innovative universities in the world, educating students from all walks of life, he said.

He left the audience in the David and Carol Lackland Center on the university's Hackettstown campus and those watching via live-stream with three attributes common to successful individuals: Emotional resilience, or being able to handle the challenges everyone will face; intellectual curiosity, so valuable now in a time of growing influence by Artificial Intelligence; and intercultural competence — the need to work with people who are difference from you, to seek them out and to recognize they're more interesting than those who are just like you.

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