

Inauguration Address
Christopher F. Roellke, PhD
Stetson University's 10th President
November 6, 2021

On Saturday, Nov. 6, 2021, Stetson University's 10th president, Christopher F. Roellke, was officially inaugurated into office at a ceremony on the Stetson University DeLand, Florida, campus.

At my final interview, just prior to being selected as Stetson's 10th president, Board of Trustees member Yvonne Chang asked me a simple, but important question: "Chris, if you were to be selected as Stetson's next president, what would you want your presidential legacy to be?"

At that time, I recall answering this question very simply: "Yvonne, I would hope my legacy would include that 'he was a kind and empathic leader, who listened, who immersed himself fully into the academic and residential community, and, fundamentally, he was a leader who left Stetson University in a better place than when he started.'"

Today, I would like to share with you something rather obvious — no leader does anything alone, and any presidential legacy that is created is done so collaboratively and with the help of so many others.

Legacies are created jointly. Legacies are created through learning via our successes, as well as from our failures. Legacies in higher education are created jointly with students, with faculty, with staff, with Board of Trustees members, with local and regional partners, and with so many important constituents that care deeply about our beloved institutions.

Because serving as Stetson's 10th president is the greatest honor and privilege of my professional life, I humbly and gratefully accept your charge, Stetson's charter, and the chain of office. I accept with humility, with enthusiasm and with optimism, and with an open mind and heart, the entire scope of responsibilities that accompany today's ritual and these important University symbols.

Chair Maureen Breakiron-Evans, President Emerita Wendy B. Libby, members of the Stetson University Board of Trustees, Stetson students, faculty, staff and alumni, honored and distinguished guests from the DeLand and Gulfport communities, and also other institutions of higher education across the country, family and friends gathered here in person and also virtually, I welcome you, and I thank you for all that you do to enable our beloved University to grow and to prosper.

This is, indeed, a very special occasion, as Stetson has had only 10 presidents since its founding as DeLand Academy in 1883. Our name changed to John B. Stetson University in 1889, and starting in the early 1950s, we began referring to ourselves as Stetson University.

Let me be clear: Today is not about me; it is not about any individual. Today is about Stetson University. Today is about teaching and learning. Today is about celebrating Hatter Nation.

Today is about reaffirming our collective commitment to improving the human condition. Today is about unleashing the fullest of our intellectual and emotional capacities to help solve our community's and our society's most pressing challenges. Today is about capitalizing on opportunities to promote the very best forms of higher education in America. Today is about our Stetson students and how we provide an especially vibrant and important form of education at our University — an education that is respectful of and attentive to individual differences; an education that embraces multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary study of the arts, sciences, humanities, business, music and law; an education that is committed to bridging any perceived or real gaps between theory and practice. Today is about focusing our collective energies to help our students to learn, to grow, to reach their full potential as informed citizens of local communities and the world. Today is about equipping our students with the skills and dispositions required to lead society judiciously to good ends.

Today is about Stetson University.

However, I did make four simple personal requests to the inaugural planning committee — a committee led by the extraordinary Julie Hunter — a committee I wish to thank for overcoming all of the logistical challenges to make today's proceedings possible, and to do so safely in person and to also make these inaugural events accessible virtually. I also need to thank all of my wonderful colleagues in Facilities, in Communications, in IT, in Dining and all throughout our campuses. Stetson is not only engaged in inauguration today, but this is also Homecoming. We just completed a series of important Board of Trustees meetings, and at 1 p.m. today our football Hatters battle the University of Dayton at Spec Martin Stadium. In typical fashion, Stetson students and colleagues have stepped up beautifully and expertly. And, for that, I thank you.

My first request for today's inaugural was that our students play a significant role in this ceremony. After all, Stetson is all about the students. A special thank you to our outstanding student speakers and performers.

My second request was that beautiful music be a part of this ceremony. Thank you, Stetson University School of Music. You have, as always, knocked it out of the park.

My third request was that my family have a role during this ceremony. Kim, Emma, Julia and Liv — you are all the most amazing women, and I am so very proud of each of you, and you have all been incredibly generous and supportive as we have embarked on this journey together as a family. And my nephew, Sergeant James Roellke, who just enrolled this fall at Stetson through the Army's Green to Gold program, serves today as the cadet master for the ROTC Color Guard.

My fourth and final request for today was that I get my own bobblehead doll! A bit of a bucket list item for me, a limited edition of 100 Rolks bobbleheads have been created! Stetson loves bobbleheads. In fact, I have two right here, one is of John B. (our mascot) and the other is of Stetson alum and (Major League Baseball) Cy Young Award winner Jacob deGrom. This bobblehead was sent to me at the very start of my presidency by my hallmate, college classmate and lifelong New York Mets fan, Rebecca Graziano. The Rolks bobbleheads, pictured prominently here on the screen, are sadly stuck on a cargo ship someplace as our world struggles

mightily with supply chain issues. These “priceless collectibles” should arrive sometime later this month. A gentle reminder that only 100 of these will be made. For the right price, you too can own a piece of Stetson history. Another friendly reminder is that Stetson University accepts cash, checks, stock, wire transfers, Venmo, Paypal, Google Pay, Apple Pay and all forms of cryptocurrency!

Today is also about family. It is about the Stetson family, and it is also about my family. Joining my wife, Kim, today are our amazing daughters, Emma, Julia and Liv, and Emma’s significant other, TJ McKeever. In addition, I am truly touched and grateful that other members of my extraordinary family are with us in person.

--My brother Jon Roellke; his wife, Jenny; and their son, Will, are with us from Washington, D.C.

--James Roellke (Stetson University Class of 2023) is here with his wife, Emily; their children, Tyson, Amiley, Jasmine and Juliana; and also his mother in-law, Veronica Ku.

--My sister, Beth Oyler, who is the mother of a Stetson graduate, Matthew Michael Oyler, Stetson Class of 2005, joins us today. Shortly after graduation from Stetson, Beth’s son Matt was a pedestrian in Orlando and was killed by a drunk driver. Beth, her husband, Mike, and my entire extended family are incredibly moved and grateful that a vital shoreline restoration project at the Sandra Stetson Aquatic Center will be named Matt’s Point in his memory. This project will support faculty/student teaching and research collaborations in Stetson’s Institute for Water and Environmental Resilience, will enhance our intercollegiate rowing program, and will reflect Stetson’s long-standing commitment to bio-diversity, to wildlife, to water quality and environmental sustainability.

--My mother, Elizabeth Roellke, who turns 91 years old later this month, is with us today! My mother raised seven children, and to date has 20 grandchildren and 17 great grandchildren. Mom, I am now 56 years old, and I honestly cannot remember a single time in which you raised your voice with me, even after I accidentally shut the car door on your fingers in the Shop Rite supermarket parking lot. This is truly remarkable because, as we all know, I am far from perfect, and this speaks to your kindness, your intelligence and your firm belief that one should not sweat the small stuff.

Mom, I know your husband, my father, Bob Roellke, is absolutely with us today in spirit, and I also know that he is absolutely sharing in your pride and your joy.

My dad, who held a Duke University basketball single-game scoring record that lasted for nearly 70 years, passed away in 1998 on the very day that I moved from Richmond, Virginia, to Poughkeepsie, New York, to start my academic appointment at Vassar College. I miss him dearly, but he continues to guide me in all that I do. My dad’s favorite salutation when saying goodbye to friends, co-workers and family was “Keep Smiling.” I always interpreted that salutation as highlighting the importance of staying positive, regardless of context, viewing all challenges as learning opportunities. As the youngest of seven children, I also benefit immensely

from having older brothers and sisters who are among my most potent teachers. Family continues to be central to all that I do professionally and personally.

Tuning in virtually are my other siblings, Rob from Portland, Oregon; Rick from Sonoma, California; Sue from Charlton, New York; and Dave from Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Also with us virtually are the Greenberg and Daly families from New York City.

A special shout out to others who I know are with us remotely:

--Many colleagues and former students from Vassar College, including what we affectionately call the Rolks Kitchen Cabinet, a monthly informal advisory group, which includes Vassar President Emerita Cappy Bond Hill, who generously served as our keynote speaker, and other valued colleagues who have sent wonderful video greetings for today's ceremony.

--My colleagues and friends from the University of Richmond, Wesleyan University and Cornell University, including my near and dear friend David Robinson, my mentor David Monk and my close professional academic collaborator colleague and friend Jennifer King Rice.

--So many of my basketball and baseball teammates over the years, including a group of high school teammates we like to refer to as BOOM — Brothers of Other Mothers. Believe it or not, we are in touch with each other almost daily, and all of these friendships are long-standing and so very important.

All of these people and many others that I do not have time to mention have been instrumental in my own upbringing and in my own pursuit of lifelong education: To you, I extend my gratitude for all of your support, guidance and encouragement.

Sometimes, when I am in the car, driving to go see a Stetson donor, board member or friend, or to attend meetings with government officials, I turn on my Sirius XM radio, which is usually stuck on one of two channels, Classic Vinyl Channel 26 or BB King's Bluesville Channel 74. Well, a few short weeks ago, I was driving back to DeLand after meeting with other college presidents for the annual meeting of the Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida. Just as I got off of I-4 (Interstate 4), on comes the song "Some Kind of Wonderful," a tune written in 1967 by John Ellison for his band, The Soul Brothers Six. Some of you will recall it was Grand Funk Railroad that made the song a hit, and "Some Kind of Wonderful" is now the most covered song in U.S. recording history, with nearly 70 artists doing various arrangements. It now ranks as the third most played song in radio history.

Well, as I pulled onto Woodland Boulevard, it struck me that this simple song, in many ways, described our beloved Stetson University: beautiful campuses, both here in DeLand and in Gulfport; great students, faculty and staff, all working together to promote education and to improve the human condition. STETSON IS, INDEED, SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL. And, if you will indulge me for a moment, I have actually written a Stetson poem based on the tune, and in an intentional nod to our Southern Baptist roots, I am going to ask for some musical help, and I am also going to ask for your participation during parts of this brief poem.

To refamiliarize you with this famous tune, can we hear a bit from our pianist? (PIANO HERE.)

For the interactive portion of the poem, can we hear a bit from our choral performers? “CAN I GET A WITNESS?” HERE.

So, I know we have a smart crowd here and that you are excellent in following instructions. When our choral performers sing, Can I Get a Witness? EVERYONE, and I mean EVERYONE, is expected to shout STETSON.

Let’s try that one time. Tim Peter ...

“CAN I GET A WITNESS?”

Crowd: STETSON!

STETSON IS SOME KIND OF WONDERFUL.

We do need whole lots of money. However, we don't need a beachfront dorm.

We got everything that students could ask for.

'Cause we got us a sweet, kind, loving Stetson.

And Stetson knows how to treat us just right.

Our Stetson, she's alright.

Our Stetson, she's clean out of sight.

Don't you know that Stetson's some kind of wonderful.

Yes, Stetson's some kind of wonderful

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

STETSON!

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

STETSON!

When we hold Stetson in our arms,

You know she sets our souls on fire

Oh, when our Stetson teaches us,

Our minds and hearts become filled with desire.

When Stetson wraps her loving arms around us,

It drives us to achieve much more.

CAN I GET A WITNESS?

STETSON!

Bring on the hurricanes, tornadoes, COVID, whatever you got.

Stetson's at the ready, with kindness, tenacity and grit.

Our Stetson, she's alright.

Our Stetson, she's clean out of sight,

Stetson's some kind of wonderful.
Yes, she's some kind of wonderful.
CAN I GET A WITNESS?
STETSON!

These are challenging times — challenging times globally, in our nation and in higher education. But I am here to tell you today, not only will Stetson be OK, we will be more than OK. With our collective efforts, we will make our form of extraordinary education accessible to really smart, really engaging young people. We will broaden and deepen Stetson's personalized, experiential and intellectually vibrant education for our students, coming to us from a wide range of social, ethnic, geographic and economic backgrounds. We will embrace innovations in curriculum, in research and out of classroom experiences to challenge our students to be the very best that they can be. We will stay laser-focused, and I mean laser-focused, on how students learn and how best to help them learn. We will pursue all of this with kindness, with empathy and through shared ownership of our University. We will meet our challenges and opportunities with openness, with honesty, with creativity, and with integrity. And, we will ALWAYS keep our students at the center of this magnificent enterprise.

As I said at the outset of my remarks, today is a time to celebrate Stetson, to celebrate each and every one of you, to celebrate our Stetson students, and to celebrate our Stetson ancestors — all of the Hatters who came before us — all who have envisioned and nurtured an institution where learning and values meet.

In an effort to bring these remarks full circle, I have reflected more deeply about Yvonne Chang's important question about presidential legacy. For what it is worth, here are my current reflections and thoughts about what I would hope to accomplish, WITH YOU, to create a legacy for our beloved institution. At the time of my departure from this role sometime in the future, I would hope the following reflections prove accurate:

WITH YOU, your 10th president led Stetson through a once-in-a-century global pandemic by focusing on public and community health, on kindness, on collective empathy, and on shared ownership.

WITH YOU, your 10th president improved the residential living and learning environment at Stetson and was deeply attentive to issues of financial and environmental sustainability.

WITH YOU, your 10th president created an atmosphere of collaboration and trust between all campus constituents — faculty, staff, students, alumni and broader community partners. In other words, "We didn't always agree with Chris, but Chris listened very carefully before acting."

WITH YOU, your 10th president was a tireless fundraiser, always seeking to sustain and enhance Stetson's form of education for current and future generations of Hatters.

WITH YOU, your 10th president embraced diversity in all of its forms, intellectual, political, social, religious, geographic — all of it — because of the core belief that the most powerful forms of education are rooted in human and lived experiences.

WITH YOU and as a member of Stetson's faculty, your 10th president created curricular pathways for students that were modern, achievable and empowered students to take charge of their own futures.

WITH YOU, your 10th president equipped students with the skills and dispositions needed in an increasingly complex and globally interconnected world.

WITH YOU, your 10th president promoted wellness, including mental and physical health, for all the people who work and study at Stetson.

WITH YOU, your 10th president created academic norms and expectations and work norms and expectations that helped to make Stetson a highly attractive place to study and to forge a career.

WITH YOU, your 10th president, when confronted with challenges and opportunities, always kept Stetson students at the forefront of the community's consciousness — always asking the core questions: What is in the best interest of our students? What is in the best interest of our academic community?

I also know that your 10th president will fall short of creating this kind of legacy without your help. Your 10th president will fall short without your patience. Your 10th president will fall short without your deep and sustained engagement. Your 10th president will fall short without your steadfast commitment to making Stetson the very best it can be.

Thank you, Hatters everywhere, for selecting me as your 10th president. Thank you, Hatters everywhere, for welcoming me to this very special community. Thank you, Hatters everywhere, for your support, your counsel, your encouragement. Thank you, Hatters everywhere, for making Stetson Some Kind of Wonderful.

Let's get to work!

Thank you and GO HATTERS!