
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Popcorn and Circumstance

Let me tell you about three people who, combined, have over 100 years of experience in commencing our students. The locations have changed, fashions have come and gone, the speeches have, hopefully, gotten shorter but for several decades these folks have been quietly attending to all the details you never see including why we no longer serve popcorn at graduation.

As a first generation college student in the family, I still pinch myself when thinking about the sacrifices my parents and grandparents made so that I might go to college. And I remember graduation like it was yesterday. Particularly vivid in my memory is Grandmother arriving early, finding the closest seat to the stage, and yelling “Michael, Michael” at every opportunity.

I’ll be honest here, I was a little embarrassed by Grandma’s enthusiasm. It didn’t take long, however, for other families to chime in with hoots and hollers, and I quickly came to see that this day was not really about me.

Elaine Henrie has been our registrar for nearly a decade but her service to commencement goes back a couple of decades when her job included reading the transcript of every graduate, just weeks before each ceremony. For years she has worried about the weather.

“In May, we can’t count on the weather,” Elaine said. “Although, we’ve only needed the rain backup three times in the past 25 years. That unpredictability always made me a little uncomfortable. Those kids are like watching my own children graduate. We just want the very best experience for everyone.”

Marilyn Buchele, a fellow commencement planner, agrees with Elaine about the weather, “I recall one year so much rain the night before and tremendous heat the next morning but the following year I needed my wool coat.”

Marilyn has been working with students on our campus for 41 years and one of her jobs on graduation day is helping the students who run in at the last minute. Without fail she quietly finds a way to get them to the right place. But you’ve never noticed, have you?

By far the best story of the day came from Ed Rathke. Ed manages the W.L. White Civic Auditorium where both our winter and spring commencements take place. He has worked 32 commencement programs.

“There are some years,” Ed recalled, “when we have ESU on Saturday morning, Flint Hills Tech College on Saturday afternoon and Emporia High School on Sunday afternoon.”

And it’s not just placing chairs. Ed worries about the appearance, the cleaning and the set-up for each ceremony.

“These are our first impressions for many families. It’s special. We want it to be the best. It’s a happy time – that has not changed in 32 years.”

Ed’s favorite story and one that Marilyn agreed was a memorable moment has come to be known as “the year of the burnt popcorn.”

“We had just finished the procession, the music just finished, the auditorium was filled,” Marilyn recalled, “when the fire alarms all went off. And I remember thinking not about fire but ‘how will I get them all back in here?’”

Ed was thinking something else entirely. He was running top speed around the second floor corridor looking for the source of the alarm.

“I found the burnt popcorn and in a split second decided the only thing to do was to run into the auditorium, arms waving, and shouting at the top of my lungs, ‘false alarm, burnt popcorn, false alarm, burnt popcorn.’”

Somehow, Ed and Marilyn managed to keep everyone in place and the ceremony continued smoothly. Although Ed notes, “we no longer serve popcorn at graduation.”

We are fortunate in Emporia to have the longevity of this dedicated team. They understand the significance of this seminal event.

So what about all those shouting grandmas? Well, this graduation team gets it right, as Marilyn notes, “We try not to get after them too much. It’s their special day.”

Our commencement is May 17 this year, and I’ll be listening closely for all the proud grandparents.

Just don’t expect popcorn.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
