Remarks on John Roush’s Retirement, Faculty Meeting May 22, 2020

John Roush has not (like Leonidas in 480 BCE) single-handedly held off 100,000 Persians at Thermopulae.

John Roush has not (like Beowulf in the 9th century) slayed the monster Grendel or even Grendel’s Momma.

He has not (like Henry V in 1415) inspired his “few, his happy few” Welsh longbowsmen to an upset victory at Agincourt.

John Roush did not grow up on Krypton like Superman, but merely in Dayton, Ohio. John cannot even fly!

But at the age of 69 John can run. Really fast! Some late evenings after leaving the Buck Room at 10:30 p.m. he goes out to the track to run windsprints!

Before John arrived at Centre in 1998, he’d graduated summa from Ohio University’s Honors College with an English major and education minor, been a Captain in Army Intelligence, and written his doctoral dissertation analyzing what makes academically-disadvantaged students succeed. John had also learned to do a lot of things with extraordinary quickness and efficiency—such as speed-reading through large tomes awkwardly cobbled together by large committees, such as secretly fixing up broken-down bikes for foreign students, such as quickly being able to assess, almost intuit the character of others: it took one hiring committee a three-hour session to come to the exact conclusion John had come to after his initial 12-minute interview.

Six weeks from now when John retires from Centre and moves on to his next challenge and adventure, he’ll join the 19th-century John C. Young and the 20th-century Thomas A. Spragens as one of the 3 longest-serving presidents in Centre’s 201-year Earth Odyssey. This isn’t the place to list all of John’s accomplishments, but we shouldn’t forget that during his 22-year tenure, while any number of colleges have been treading water or even sunk (so to speak), Centre has dramatically increased both the number and the diversity of its faculty, staff, and students; has added an amazing 21 new faculty professorships and the Centre
Scholars; has initiated the Brown, Bonnor, Posse, Lincoln, and Grissom student programs; has raised $370 million in capital campaigns and spent 100-million spiffifying the campus; and has increased the number of faculty who get to teach courses in the nutritious context of a different culture abroad from 6, when he arrived, to 26 this year.

During this transformation, John has published 75 articles, given 300 speeches; chaired important state, regional, and national education groups; and found time each year to show up for about 85 different student events. And ... because the only thing he’s had to do every January is all of those things (while preparing for his winter Board meeting), he’s voluntarily taught a class overstuffed with students every CentreTerm!

When Harry met Sally, it took them 12 years to get together. John is not given to procrastination: on the day he arrived at college he noticed one Susie Miller in the cafeteria line. John was his best, did his best, and has no regrets that he then married her. Since arriving on campus she’s been in a league of her own. The person who was at the center of her college cheerleading squad has become a 24/7/365 cheerleader for Centre College. (If you think I’m speaking metaphorically here, just ask Greg Mason what made the difference when the men’s basketball team beat Berry in February.) One reason our campus has looked so attractive is that, as an unpaid volunteer, Susie Roush has monitored every tree, considered every bush, and has rarely walked across our campus without assaulting some stray piece of trash or ripping out some hapless weed. When you’re next on campus, listen carefully and you can hear the weeds whispering “Yikes! Hide! Here comes Susie!”

Over the years John & Susie have both kept mind-boggling schedules. It’s not been uncommon for either of them to drive through the night to get somewhere, John O.D.-ing on sunflower seeds to stay awake, Susie pulling her car into highway rest-stops to catch short naps. Both apparently run on some kind of fuel not available to the rest of us.

And just what is it that’s made the Roushes so popular with so many Centre students? Well, you might say their extraordinary openness. Students will forget many things they learn in our classes, alas, but they’ll never forget being invited into our homes. For the past 22 years every single Centre student has been invited into Craik House at least twice: during their first-year orientation and as
seniors. Many get hugs from one or both Roushes at both events as well as at special moments in between. So one measurement of their openness we might this afternoon call their “hugging quotient.”

**Hugging quotient.** A few years ago I noticed among the group of students who stayed for hot chocolate after the Sunday-evening Taise service at the Presbyterian Church a downcast, sad-looking student standing off by herself. She wasn’t alone for long. John, and then Susie, went over to her. They talked, she perked up, and they left with hugs.

That’s not all: there’s more! A few years ago we had on campus a group of visitors from Myanmar that included a famous Buddhist Priest. Before his arrival we were advised not to touch, or even approach this High Eminence. During dinner at Shaker Village the Priest ate separately, by himself, in another room—out of sight, certainly out of touch. After dinner someone suggested a group photograph outside. Susie and John instinctively book-ended him on either side—this move is hard wired into their DNA. The High Eminence didn’t seem to mind. When we dispersed he took the initiative to give both John and Susie a kind of a hug! East met West…with a kind of a hug. I rest my case. If the hugging quotient scale runs from 1 to 10, the Roushes would be a 17. Q.E.D.

All this was before the novel coronavirus hit us in mid-March. Centre has survived the Civil War, the 1918 pandemic, the Depression, and two World Wars. How lucky have we been to’ve had, at this challenging beginning of the COVID-19 era, someone at the helm with John’s stoic steadiness, relentless resilience, and genetic optimism.

*Finally:* think of this little College as a human body.

**Facilities Management,** who keeps our curb appeal so attractive, is Centre’s *skin and face,*

The *football, soccer, track, lacrosse* and other teams would be its *sinews and muscles.*

**Cowan,** serving 4000 meals a day, would be its *mouth (and stomach),*

**Admissions,** forever scanning the horizon for new prospects, would be Centre’s *eyes and ears,*
Development, gingerly—but humanely—clawing money from alumni, would be its fingers,

The faculty, of course, would be its cerebral cortex,

But for the past 22 years John Roush has been the beating heart of this institution, pumping oxygen throughout the entire body, keeping the lifeblood for the rest of us flowing constantly.

**Therefore, be it resolved that as John Roush retires after 22 years of keeping the Centre ship not only afloat but on an even keel, steadily, inexorably sailing into sunnier, more sparkling waters, the Centre faculty offers him its affection and its great, deep, and heartfelt thanks.**

- Milton Reigelman