

VOICES FROM BOWDOIN'S PAST—CONVOCATION—AUGUST 30, 2023

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The Bowdoin Prize is the highest honor of our College. Twenty eight years ago, on this very stage, The Bowdoin Prize was awarded to George Mitchell of the Class of 1954.

George, who celebrated his ninetieth birthday nine days ago, grew up in Waterville, Maine's hardscrabble Head of Falls neighborhood, a triangle of land along the banks of what was then a foul-smelling Kennebec River, and bordered on its other sides by a textile mill and railroad tracks. His mother was a Lebanese immigrant who could neither read nor write English. His father was the orphaned son of Irish immigrants who left school after the fourth grade and who later worked as a janitor at Colby College. According to George, ***"their central goal in life was the education of their children. They knew the hard life of those who lacked learning. So, they worked long and hard to ensure that we could go to college."***

Even so, George's chance at college nearly slipped away.

***"By the time I graduated from high school,"*** he remembered, ***"especially hard times had hit our family. Early that year my father lost his job. For a full year, with rising anger and declining self-esteem, he searched in vain for work. Fortunately, my mother continued to work as a weaver in a textile mill on the night shift. That kept us going, but it was a difficult, tense year. For the first few months, there was no talk of college."***

Eventually, at the recommendation of his father's former boss, George was encouraged to look into Bowdoin.

***"A week later, I set off for Brunswick. I was sixteen years old, totally naive, had traveled little outside of Waterville, had never been on a train or a plane. My parents didn't have a car, so I got up very early in the morning and walked to the outskirts of Waterville to hitchhike to Brunswick. Within minutes, I got a ride. After he heard my story, the driver took me right to the Bowdoin campus. Since I was several hours early for my appointment, I walked back and forth across the entire campus. I can still recall my feeling of awe."***

Years later, George remembered meeting that day with the dean of admissions.

***"Although I was very nervous, as out of place as a fish out of water, he made me feel at home. When I told him that my parents couldn't afford tuition payments, he was reassuring. Don't worry, he said, if you're willing to work, we'll figure something out. And he did. He helped me with several part-time jobs which, combined with some scholarship assistance, enabled me to get through."***

Not only did George Mitchell "get through," he used his education and the opportunities it produced to achieve one of the most stunning success stories of any Bowdoin graduate.

Following an early career as a lawyer and aide to US Senator Ed Muskie, and a brief stint as a federal judge, George Mitchell was appointed and then elected in his own right to the US Senate. He would go on to serve for six years as senate majority leader and would later turn down an appointment to the US Supreme Court to pursue and achieve peace in Northern Ireland. He is the former chairman of Disney and a former special envoy for Middle East peace. George also led the 2006 investigation into steroid

use by Major League Baseball players, and he counts The Mitchell Institute as his proudest accomplishment—an organization he founded in 1999 to increase the “likelihood that young people from every community in Maine will aspire to, pursue, and achieve a college education.”

George was a history major at Bowdoin, and it is through the lens of history that he sees the world today.

***“American democracy,” he has said, “like all democracies, depends upon informed and rational public debate for successful operation and ultimate survival. When public debate is filled with falsehoods, with wild allegations of conspiracies, when the simple assertion of a charge is deemed sufficient to repeat it over and over, all of us need critical reasoning skills to distinguish fiction from reality, fantasy from fact.***

***It is only through critical thought, logical reasoning, careful definition, and open debate that citizens can hope to see past the blur of information to the realities on which their choices must be made.***

***And it is these reasoning skills that are the most important contribution of a higher education. They provide the crucial lubricant of society, without which contradictory claims cannot be reconciled.***

***The ability to reason, to think clearly, to examine old assumptions and rebut misleading argument is an essential counterweight to the assault of information and misinformation with which we are bombarded every day.***

***Higher education is the only institution in our society which has as its central purpose the continued re-examination of our society's assumptions, the constant review of our past, and the never-ending search for a better future.***

George’s reflection on Bowdoin further emphasizes these ideals.

***Bowdoin has served the people of Maine, and the nation, by opening the eyes and minds of [students], to the wonders of the world in which we live, and to the limitless possibilities open to those who combine knowledge, energy, and a willingness to risk with a commitment to the common good.***

***I was one of those fortunate young men.***

***As I have said often, one of the luckiest days of my life was when I first set foot on this beautiful campus.***

***There’s little certainty in life, but of this I am certain: my life would have been much different, and far less, had I not come to Bowdoin.***

The words of Senator George Mitchell, Class of 1954.