**REUNION SPEECH**

**FOR**

**CHARLES WILSON**

Hello everyone! It’s a great privilege for me to be here at this wonderful event.... (**If you want make a joke you can say**), and as the joke goes, at **MY** age, it’s a great privilege to be **ANYWHERE**!!! (**And wait for the laugh**). Attending this reunion is the culmination of collecting a lifetime’s worth of memories, connections, questions asked and answered and paths taken with roads not yet explored.... and to get a chance to see old friends and acquaintances is just really **PRICELESS**. I’ve had the pleasure to stay in touch with some of you and I’m sure that as we reconnect and reminisce about life back in Strong, Arkansas, we’ll have revelations and “**AHA**!!” moments that we never even expected were possible.

I don’t know if any of you are familiar with the artist, David Hockney. He’s an Englishman living in California, and by many accounts, he is considered one of the greatest living artists of our time. Hockney is about to turn 81 very soon, but that doesn’t stop him. He is in his studio every day. He paints at least six or seven hours each day. He may be losing his hearing.... he’s okay with that.... he prefers to paint in silence. Because he’s such a national and international treasure, he’s been interviewed a lot lately. I am reminded of something he said that really touched me. He said, “I may be eighty years old, but when I’m in the studio working, I’m just **thirty years old**.... so I may as well stay and paint!” Being in this crowd makes me feel like I’m back at Gardner all over again.... and no matter what year you claim as your own with regard to your graduation, I just **BET** that you can understand that... and you just might feel the same as Hockney while you’re with us this weekend.

It’s funny, but I thought I would check online and search for Gardner High School... a relic if ever there was one... We have to remember that, thanks to computers and the Internet, Google is probably the best virtual scrapbook ever invented!! Bill Gates has said, “The Internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow...”

I’m just glad they left some “benches” for all of **US** to gather, chat and share anecdotes in that virtual town square!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). And although there aren’t **many** artifacts to find from the “Semi Paleozoic Era”... otherwise known as the years I attended Gardner, (**Wait for the laugh**) some miraculously have survived. Do you know, the yearbook for the graduating class of 1966 is available for viewing online? How many of you here remember what it was called??? Yes. It was the Tiger.... and boy, seeing that, even though it was from after I graduated, still brought back a flood of nostalgia...

Since I graduated in 1965, you can imagine there’s been **A LOT** of water under the bridge. Back then, we lived through segregation.... I doubt I have to remind you... and as I recall, many of the textbooks we used were handed down from the “white” schools... It didn’t matter... we were eager to learn and we did. Decades of experience earned through our mutual education made lessons that much sweeter since I earned my foundation at Gardner High School. I plan on spending this entire weekend searching for familiar names and faces and I have a feeling that, as some of you in the audience see me standing here before you, you are probably saying to yourselves or your friends..... “Wait a minute.... **CHARLES WILSON?????** Oh... **YES**!!!! I remember him now!!!!! Math!!! Accounting!!! **JULIUS CAESAR in ENGLISH CLASS!!!** (**Name two or three other subjects and activities you were known ... they can be small things... for and wait for the laugh**). But who amongst us also remembers \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, or even \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_? How about the alma mater or the fight song? It’s okay if you don’t...

Speaking of unforgettable memories of high school, to me that goes hand in hand with two words... **JULIUS CAESAR**.... and I **CANNOT** invoke this work by Shakespeare without thinking of our intelligent, caring, dedicated English teacher..... and I mean that... unsolicited praise... I mean it’s **NOT** like she’s going to give me a bad grade or anything....**THIS WEEKEND**!! (**Wait for the laugh**). I want to take a moment to acknowledge the **ONE**... the **ONLY**... Mrs. Marjorie O’Guinn... she was a wonderful teacher and a superb role model. She represents the benefits of living a life filled with mental, educational, and spiritual curiosity and exploration and it is an honor to see her again and share this occasion with her.... (**If you want to make a joke, you can say)**.... I am grateful for the lessons I learned from this powerful woman and to prove that time and tides don’t really change a person.... when I saw her earlier and we reconnected, I have to admit, I got a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.... when the thought crossed my mind...”**WHAT IF THERE’S A TEST ON JULIUS CAESAR THIS WEEKEND**???” (**Wait for the laugh**).... Yes, Mrs. O’Guinn... you **CERTAINLY** taught us well... and your English lessons are the foundations of life that have stayed with me all these years....you left an **impression**...a positive one.

I can still feel the pain of the words when we read the part in “Julius Caesar” where Brutus wields that sword... How many of us recall the line from that Shakespeare masterpiece, “Experience is the teacher of all things?” **NO**??? Don’t tell Mrs. O’Guinn... but **neither do I** (**Wait for the laugh**)... But what I **DO** have to point out is that when we were in school, we sat in class, we **TRIED** to pay attention... really, we did... we memorized what was necessary to pass our tests and earn our high school diplomas..... we may not have committed **EVERY SINGLE DETAIL** to memory, but that doesn’t make our experience in school any less important. Now that we have the opportunity to look back at our young selves, as we were just **really** starting out in life, and as we hear again the words that passed through us, they take on new meaning and importance. Now that we have had our lifetimes of experience... **so far**, we can acknowledge our **teachers**.... the **real ones**, like Mrs. O’Guinn, and the **circumstances** that molded our lives and got us to this point.

As I prepared my thoughts to speak with all of you today, I must admit that our respected English teacher presented us with valuable food for thought..... so much so, that now, over **FIFTY YEARS** since my own high school graduation, I find myself really appreciating the greats. It was Shakespeare, again, who said, “All the world’s a stage,

and all the men and women merely players: they have their exits and entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts, his acting being **seven ages**....” well doesn’t **THAT** sound like the senior attendees of this reunion!! (**Wait for the laugh**). Looking back, I can see the several ages that have comprised my life so far, and I have a very good feeling that you’ve all been thinking along the same lines....

Some of the other things I remember... or might I say, **couldn’t forget**, make me smile as I think of them... one was our witty banter.... **BOY**!! Were we clever!!! We’d run our mouths off at the drop of a hat!!! I mean, after all, we **WERE** in **HIGH SCHOOL**!!! I’m sure back then we were certain we knew **EVERYTHING**!! (**If you can think of any instances, mention one or two**). I believe every generation has its slang, and I doubt we were any different. I’ll never forget when we would \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, we’d have an expression for that\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ !!!! Or how about \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?. That was a good one!! Another thing that sticks in my mind.... **ROMAN NUMERALS**!!! Wow!!! Last I checked we were in Strong, Arkansas... not Ancient Rome!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). I remember little snips of what life was like trying to learn all those X’s and V’s... how many times did we try? I don’t know... **I lost count**!!! All I can say is that the irony is that I wound up making my career in finance.... and thank goodness we use **NORMAL** numbers... but how many of us know the technical term for them is **NOT** “normal” but “Arabic?”.... still learning something new .... every day, and that lifelong curiosity was born and developed right Gardner High School. I have to give credit to our high school experience for teaching me and guiding me to learn so much.... I became interested in, and learned, the art of writing....and there was algebra and geometry... we learned about business and history, and literature... and we got a glimpse of what life might be like when we made our way after high school... what would it be like to face the challenges of working and what to do in that environment... and I learned the truly fine art... and craft... of how to communicate.... I hope that so far my skills are being put to good use today!!! (**Wait for the laugh**). What I found out as I entered adulthood was that we got a good, well-rounded educational foundation at Gardner High School. The foundations were strong... it was up to us to build upon those lessons and forge an interesting, worthwhile, satisfying life for ourselves.

As we have all learned throughout the years, each stage and each experience brings us lessons and wisdom that we then carry with us, and **within** us....

Upon graduation from Gardner High School, I went on to study business administration, specializing in accounting, at Grambling State University in Louisiana. **BOY**.... was my perspective about to change!!! Just to give you an idea of how different college life would be from home life in Strong, the student population of Grambling State in 2015 was almost **FIVE THOUSAND**... by comparison, according to the 2000 census, the population of the **ENTIRE** city of Strong, Arkansas was ....**READY**??? **SIX-HUNDRED AND FIFTY ONE**!! I had a feeling that regarding socializing, I had some catching up to do!!! (**Wait for the laugh**).

Once I graduated from Grambling State, I was ready to set off and make my mark on the world... or at least the United States...My first job was with IBM Corporation and a move to Houston, Texas... with several years of varied experience accomplished, I began the next phase of my career at, yes... The Department of Finance and Revenue where I went from Tax Auditor to Senior Tax Auditor, focusing on various segments of business and industry. My projects and experience have taken me all over the country to attend multistage Tax Commission meetings, and I have even taught state taxation courses... and everywhere I went, for all of those projects and audits I had to untangle... for all the people I taught and from all those I have learned, my foundation gained at Gardner served me well. Many times I have been in situations, from San Diego to Baltimore, Connecticut to Washington DC, and I still think of myself as that young man from a small town and I’m so thankful to have received the tools and wisdom that helped me get through life.

Because a thirst for knowledge and a curiosity for new things always influenced my life and allowed me to build my career, in 2008, I graduated from Kaplan University in Legal Studies. There’s a television commercial that reminds us, “The more you know...” and I truly believe that it’s of vital importance to continue to be curious, interested, and committed to the quality of life. While it’s true that “We don’t know what we don’t know,” exploring with the purpose of learning for its own sake, opens doors, connects dots, and has the power to begin and continue countless worthwhile conversations. Remember when I said I was eager to communicate?.... I was, I am, and I plan to remain so.... and now that all of us are back in touch, life` becomes that much sweeter and more interesting.

Although my high school education at Gardner was just a beginning, every once in a while, I look back and wonder, “Did I **REALLY** do **THAT**?” I am so proud to see so many of you fellow Gardner High alumni here for this great event, I am eager to hear your stories, and I bet there are some good ones!!! And for those of you that may think you “didn’t do much,” think again.... I bet you accomplished a lifetime’s worth and I would love to hear about that too...

The lessons that Mrs O’Guinn and her colleagues taught have the power to last a lifetime... how do I know? We’re all **LIVING PROOF**. These lessons took me... us... far and wide... whether geographically or in our minds and hearts, we learned the value of exploration and using our imaginations. And as I traveled, doors opened to new and bigger events and opportunities. There’s an expression that teaches us, “If opportunity doesn’t knock, build another door.” We all may not have taken carpentry class, but we absolutely learned how to build our own doors!! ... and while sometimes those new situations presented challenges, we learned ways to get through the tougher spots in life.

I think it’s safe to say that along with the lessons, Mrs. McGuinn and her fellow teachers left us a legacy that we in turn have passed on to our colleagues, co-workers, family members and friends. In the poem, ***Invictus***, written by William Ernest Henley (**I checked... not Edgar Allan Poe**), he declares, “I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul...” I learned that over **FIFTY** years ago in English class. Isn’t it astounding how really **poetic** life can be?? ... and how when something touches us, it stays with us and grows with us.

I think one of the most important lessons I’ve learned throughout life is to stay curious and remain interested.... it’s the secret to David Hockney’s success and longevity, and I know **YOU** know that secret as well, or you probably wouldn’t be here. We all came from a small town, but as the expression goes, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.” Whether that step carried you far down your path or one thousand miles inward or even just around the block, we’ve grown into the people we were destined to be. And even though that small town was segregated and had hand me down books, it **DIDN’T** stop **US**... I want to acknowledge all of you for that. Everything we’ve experienced and received is a gift... and that brought us the gift of experience, confidence, determination, and survival. Have you ever heard the saying, “I am part of all that I have met?” It’s true. Gardner High and all of the people I met there and along the way have all become a part of me, wherever I have gone. I would like to think that I have been a part of you too.... This reunion is special for the gifts it bestows on all of us... reminiscences, rekindled friendships, the retelling of old tales, and the making of new ones. To my friends and associates that have been with me for the adventure called life, thank you for your companionship. For the new people I meet or reconnect with this weekend, welcome aboard!!! Here’s to a fantastic event and may we all make new memories together... to tell at our next reunion!! Thank you all!!