REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
Celebration of the Life of Coretta Scott King, Feb. 8, 2006

I am pleased to be here and join with all of you in paying tribute to the life of Coretta Scott King, and remembering and honoring her devotion to civil rights and human rights over the course of more than half a century. Mrs. King is one of our nation’s heroic figures who will live on in our history books for her exemplary life.

Coretta Scott King was baptized by fire into the Civil Rights Movement almost from the moment it began. Just two months after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man, Coretta was at home with her infant daughter while her husband was away preaching, and a bomb exploded at her house. She narrowly escaped being killed.

Putting her life on the line for social justice was not the career she had envisioned and prepared for. After graduating from Antioch College in Ohio, she studied voice and violin at the New England Conservatory in Boston. And she protested that she was not interested in promising young ministers when a friend first introduced her to Martin Luther King, Jr., who was pursuing his Ph.D. at Boston University at the time.

But as a child she often had to pick cotton to help her family make ends meet, and she understood what was at stake. Despite the dangers, she embraced the Civil Rights Movement and became a dynamic force in articulating its message, even as she was raising four young children.

She was often seen beside Martin Luther King, Jr., as he traveled, preached, and led freedom marches. The two of them and their band of courageous collaborators shook our society from its complacency and made us face up to what the words of our Constitution and Declaration of Independence really meant. She was at his side when he received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. But she was also a leader in her own right. She put her musical abilities to use, organizing Freedom Concerts that combined music, poetry, and narration to raise funds for the fledgling Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which her husband had helped to found.

In 1962, she served as a delegate to the 17-nation disarmament conference in Geneva, Switzerland. She was the first woman to deliver the Class Day Address at Harvard University and the first woman to preach at St. Paul’s Cathedral in London.

Even after Dr. King was shot and killed in Memphis, Tennessee on April 4, 1968, she continued on, focusing her efforts on keeping Dr. King’s dream alive. Just days after his death, she led the march through the streets of Memphis that he had come to organize. Within a year of his death, she founded the King Center for Nonviolent Social Change, and it continues today not just as a national memorial, but also as an advocate of justice, equality, and peace. She remained at the helm of the Center for more than 25 years.

Coretta Scott King worked tirelessly for the designation of Martin Luther King’s birthday, January 15, as a holiday commemorating his life and legacy, and reminding us of the importance of his dream of freedom, economic opportunity, and equality for all... reminding us of our
obligation to confront racism and inequality and work to root out its consequences from our society.

At the same time, she expanded the dream from civil rights to human rights for everyone who needed hope or help. She championed the rights of women and children, gays and lesbians, the poor, the sick, and the homeless. She traveled to South Africa to protest against apartheid and to Latin America to speak out against poverty.

Her concern for America never wavered as she spoke out later about her opposition to capital punishment and the war in Iraq, calling for peace and non-violence. She promoted educational opportunity and environmental responsibility, and advocated for compassion as well as medical advances for those suffering from AIDS.

I was a student here at Georgia Tech during the Civil Rights Movement and the integration of this institution. Dr. King and Coretta Scott King provided us with examples of courage in the face of bigotry and intolerance, and I have continued to be influenced by their leadership throughout my life.

Coretta Scott King was a woman of tremendous courage and strength. She was also a woman of quiet dignity and unflappable grace. She understood the value of perseverance and patience, which enabled her to remain calm and composed in the face of clamor and upheaval. She followed the way of nonviolence in the face of threats and attempts at intimidation, and her serenity and gracious demeanor was as instrumental in making her a powerful symbol of the message of peace and respect for others as anything she said.

She touched the lives of thousands of people all across the nation and around the globe. And today, we here at Georgia Tech join the millions around the world in our expression of appreciation for her courage, commitment and heart, and most of all that she helped free us from the bonds of the past while opening doors to the future. Coretta Scott King was truly an inspirational leader who brought a quiet but powerful dignity to the struggle for human rights. We will miss her presence as a champion and role model for that important cause.

Here at Georgia Tech, we have joined in that quest. About the same time Martin and Coretta King began their lifelong crusade, our football team was invited to play in the 1956 Sugar Bowl. The governor of Georgia asked the Board of Regents to force Georgia Tech to withdraw from the game because the opposing team had an African American full back. The Georgia Tech campus erupted in protest. Students marched to the State Capitol and the governor’s mansion, which was then in Ansley Park, hanging the governor in effigy at each stop. The president of Georgia Tech announced he had no intention of breaking the game contract, and the faculty Senate gave him a 5-minute standing ovation. In the end, the Board of Regents relented, and the game was played.

Then in 1961, Georgia Tech became the first university in the Deep South to integrate peacefully and voluntarily without court order. There was strong sentiment among the students and faculty, as is still the case today, that anyone who could do the work belonged at Georgia Tech. And today we have become a national leader in providing opportunity to women and minorities in sciences and engineering.
Coretta Scott King’s life was concurrent with our own efforts, and she helped us along. She was a personal friend to members of the Georgia Tech family such as Robert Haley, and she was a supporter of FOCUS, which brings outstanding African American undergraduates from around the nation to Georgia Tech for the King Holiday weekend each January.

Her passing last week is a reminder to each of us that we have a personal responsibility to continue the work, to carry the torch of human rights and dignity forward in our own lives. Our world would be diminished if she and Dr. King had not done what was right in the face of intolerance. Our lives would be less than they are today if the Kings had not made a difference. Here on our campus, we know from their example that we too can make a difference by opening the doors for talented young men and women who pass our way and who can, in turn, change the world for the better in their time.