

REMARKS BY GEORGIA TECH PRESIDENT G. WAYNE CLOUGH
"When the Whistle Blows," April 17, 2008

I would like to welcome all of you to this solemn ceremony of remembrance to pay tribute to the members of our Georgia Tech campus community who were lost to us during the course of the past year.

I have always maintained that the essence of Georgia Tech's greatness is not bricks and mortar, but people. And this evening we remember and pay tribute to 16 valued members of the Georgia Tech family who passed away during the past year while enrolled or employed at Georgia Tech. Eleven of them were members of our faculty and staff, who devoted their lives to educating students, conducting research, and keeping all the campus cog wheels turning, so that we can continue moving forward. Five were students, who studied and hung out, worked and played on this lawn and in these buildings that surround us here.

Some of these members of our campus community fought valiantly against disease even as they pursued the things they loved here among us. They could have complained about the cards they were dealt, but instead they concentrated on playing well with the hand they held. We admire their spirit and courage, and we celebrate what they were able to accomplish in the face of their illness. They taught us much about what it means to live.

And their influence will continue to be felt. Many of those we lose to illness suffer from cancer. Tina Prestridge, who is among those we honor today, spent the final months of her life crusading to expand treatment opportunities for Georgians with cancer, and her husband will carry on that crusade in her memory. Others left us suddenly and unexpectedly. They were gone in a flash, and we were stunned by the suddenness of losing them. We still find it hard to believe they are not here with us.

Our life together on this campus is a tapestry, and each member of our Georgia Tech community is a colorful thread – an important part of the interwoven fabric of our life together. When we suffer the loss of valued members who have been an important part of the interwoven fabric of life on our campus, we lose something from the color and texture of our life together.

We miss them, and we are saddened by the loss of each one. But we are also grateful for the opportunity to have known them and for the contribution they made to the Georgia Tech community. This evening we pause to honor the memory of each one, to remember their talents and skills, pay tribute to their contributions to our campus community, and to express our thanks for the time we spent with them and the ways they touched our lives.

Abraham Lincoln said, "In the end, it is not the years in your life that count. It is the life in your years." Many of the faculty and staff, and especially the students we remember this evening were not destined to have long years on this Earth. But we remember them for the life, the vigor, and the joy that they put into the years they were given.

We remember them for what they meant to us on a personal level and as an integral part of the Georgia Tech family. What counts for us today are the personal memories we can still see so clearly in the mirror of our minds – memories of good times together here on campus, memories of teaching and learning, memories of smiles and laughter, memories of kindness and caring.

A sense of their presence still lingers in the classrooms, offices, and workplaces they inhabited just a few short months ago, reminding us of the ways in which they contributed to our life here on campus. We remember the skill and devotion they brought to their daily tasks. We remember the many small caring and helpful things they did day by day, that changed us for the better, that helped to strengthen the bonds of friendship in our campus community, and that made this Institute a better place.

In his poem "Hallowed Ground," Thomas Campbell wrote, "To live in the hearts we leave behind is not to die." These members of our community still live in the hearts of the families and friends who are gathered here. They were a gift to the Georgia Tech community. Our lives are richer because we had the opportunity to know them. We will remember the difference they made in our lives, and we will always hold them close in memory.

We began this special ceremony in 2000 to celebrate the contribution made to Georgia Tech by the members of our community who passed away. Each year, we gather on this historic site at the heart of the original four acres that formed the Georgia Tech campus when it opened in 1885. Through the years, this lawn served as the parade ground for the troops who were trained at Tech as aviators, technicians, supply officers, and reserve officers during both World Wars. It is a fitting place to honor the fallen.

We salute them with the Georgia Tech Whistle – an old factory steam whistle that has been an integral part of life here on campus for more than 100 years. It is both a source and a symbol of our most valued traditions. We get up by the Whistle, and it keeps us on schedule throughout the day, as it blows at five minutes before the hour, signaling the change of classes.

We also blow the Whistle to commemorate special events, like when the Yellow Jackets win on Grant Field, or when a fund-raising campaign reaches its successful conclusion. These have been special celebrations in the life of our campus.

The third occasion on which the Whistle blows is this special annual ceremony to pay tribute to the members of the Georgia Tech community who passed away during the past 12 months. Today we continue that tradition as a formal and solemn way to acknowledge the contribution made to our campus life by these 16 members of our community, and to say farewell to them.

In our regular, daily routine, the final blast of the Whistle sounds at five minutes before six each evening. After that, the Whistle falls silent until five minutes before seven the next morning. Tonight we will conclude our memorial tribute by breaking that silence. Sixteen blasts floating on the evening air will celebrate each of these lives that had special meaning to us. A seventeenth blast will commemorate the alumni, retired faculty and staff, and friends who have passed away during the past year. And when the Whistle resumes its regular schedule of blowing at five minutes before the hour tomorrow morning, those routine blasts will have a deeper meaning for each of us. Each time the Whistle sounds in the days to come, it will continue to remind us of those we loved who still live on in our hearts.

For each of the families who will not be here on campus to hear the Whistle blow in the coming days, we have a gift of remembrance – a replica of the Georgia Tech Whistle.

We are also going to light candles in memory of each one of these 16 people. And we know that the light from the contributions they have made to Georgia Tech and to their family and friends will continue to shine on our campus and in our lives. At this time I am going to light the Unity Candle, representing the collective spirit of this Institute of which they were a part and to which they contributed.