Remarks by Revd. Dr. Sam Wells at Mary Semans Memorial, January 30, 2012

Greeting

Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans was born when Duke University was no more than a twinkle in her great uncle’s eye. But Mary’s been a twinkle in the eye of this university ever since – and not just this university, but this city, this state, and beyond. And we’ve gathered today because she put a twinkle in our eye too. We’ve come together to hand her over to God, that she might be a twinkle in God’s eye forever. Let us pray.
Loving God, you see the twinkle in our eye, and you see the tears. As you gave us the joy and the companionship of life with Mary, give us now the courage and the hope to live without her. As you gave us abundant life through her life, give her abundant life through yours, that she may be the apple of your eye, and abide in your everlasting arms, now and always. Amen.

Gospel Introduction

I’m going to read about two people, who both, like Mary, were well on in years, who both symbolized their people, and who had both spent their lives longing for the redemption of their society. The story tells how they rejoiced to see salvation in the shape of a tiny baby. I believe we can see Mary’s life through the window of theirs.

Gospel

The gospel is taken from Luke chapter two.
Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when Mary and Joseph brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.
Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Reflection

Simeon says to God, “My eyes have seen your salvation.” We’re here today because Mary Semans was an agent of God’s salvation; because she was a woman who helped us see salvation, in education, in art, in civil rights, in medicine, in horticulture, in music. Because of Mary Semans, each one of us can say, better than we otherwise could have, “My eyes have seen your salvation.” We celebrate that. What a wonderful thing to be able to say.

But that’s not the real reason why we’re here. The real reason we’re here is because of something else Simeon says, this time to Jesus’ mother Mary. Simeon says, “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” The real reason we’re here today is because Mary Semans was a sword that pierced our souls. Pierced our souls with her kindness. Pierced our souls with her wisdom. Pierced our souls with her honesty. Pierced our souls with her courage. Pierced our souls with her fierce, indomitable, irrepressible, enduring spirit. Pierced our souls with her love.

Thank you, Lord God, for the gift of Mary Semans. She showed us your salvation. And she pierced our souls with love.
Remarks by President Dick Brodhead at Mary Semans Memorial, January 30, 2012

Duke University welcomes you to this celebration of our beloved Mary Semans. This institution and Mary were so intertwined that neither had a life apart from the other. Mary was a young member of the Duke family when Duke University was created. The East and West campuses were built when she was still a child. She moved to Durham full time at fourteen, shortly before Duke Chapel was completed. At 15, she enrolled at the Woman's College. From this start and throughout her life, she loved this university, knew pretty much everything that happened here, and gave support to every act that took Duke forward.

But though she had a profound institutional impact, in Mary's case good works took a very personal form. I remember how it started with me. On a December day in 2003, a stranger to this school, I was announced as the president who would succeed Nan Keohane. After the news conference, I was taken on a kind of victory lap to meet the greats of Duke University -- a celebrated cancer surgeon, a celebrated basketball coach, and more. As the tour drew to a close, my guide told me with obvious excitement that it was going to work out for me to meet one more of Duke's giants -- Mary Semans, our chief link to Duke's founding family.

Now, Mary's name was not so well known to me as Coach K's. From a brief account, I was expecting a grand dame or even a kind of local royalty -- Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans! All those names! And I was not totally disappointed. When I was taken in to meet her, in the words of the novelist Henry James, this lady did have the air of being someone in particular. Such a sparkle to those eyes! Such stylishness! (Don't you love the fact that the commemorative picture on the Duke website is of Mary in bright yellow with the skirt quite short? As they say in Durham: Not Afraid of Flavor.)

But if she cut a figure, haughtiness was no part of the equation. When I arrived, Cindy and our son Dan had already been with Mary for 10 or 15 minutes, and when I came in, they were going at it a mile a minute, moving from one shared pleasure to another, as if they had known each other for years. She had engaged them, she had taken outsiders and made them quite at home--and at the end of two minutes, she had done the same for me.

I dwell on this because if Mary's work will live on through the institutions she supported -- Duke University, the Duke Endowment, North Carolina School of the Arts, the civic and cultural activities she supported in Durham -- her effect arose from her unique skill at personal relations, the way she imbued each individual encounter with grace, attention and love. Did you ever receive a thank you note from Mary? I remember dozens: each of which made me feel like I was being fully appreciated for the first time in my life. When Mary took Cindy and me to the 50th
anniversary production of *West Side Story* at the School of the Arts, she singled out each young performer for the sincerest, warmest, most discerning appreciation. I have studied up on Mary's leadership in civil rights causes in Durham. As you know, as a widowed mother of four, she was one of the first two women ever elected to the city council, elected in the same year as integrationist mayor Mutt Evans; later, she became the leader, with Elna Spaulding, of the cross-racial group Women in Action for the Prevention of Violence and Its Causes. But these civic acts were built on personal acts of engagement and appreciation, friendships Mary built person by person across artificial social divides. Not just racial divides, but *all* divides. Who hasn't heard tales of Mary stopping to embrace people and ask about their families as she did her grocery shopping, or stopping by a local merchant's to ask how business was? If Mary knew you, then you mattered.

When Mary Semans was honored at the Nasher Museum two years back, I found a phrase that I haven't been able to improve on: she was the embodiment of unconditional love. She saw more good in others than any of us are used to seeing in ourselves, and she made you want to *be* the person that she believed in. She made this city, this university, and this region better in actuality by the way she believed in their possibility. She couldn't help it: that's what it meant to be Mary D. B. T. Semans.

Lucky us, to be part of the world that Mary Semans loved and made.
Remarks by The Honorable James B. Hunt at Mary Semans Memorial, January 30, 2012

Well, it was a lucky day for North Carolina when Mary Semans, I thought, at age 15, but I now know at age 14 came to Duke University, to the family home in Durham where she raised this wonderful family, which has done so much for North Carolina and for our nation. Many will speak today of her kindness and generosity. I want to speak of her public spirit and involvement. In her days as a young mother, as I said, she became a public citizen and leader in Durham. But she also soon became an important partner to governors and other public leaders in this state.

While she and her family were always generous philanthropists, she knew that North Carolina could only be the state she wanted it to be if we set big goals: goals for ourselves, brought our people, black, white and Hispanic, together, and committed the public resources to become great. She urged us to focus not so much on crafting tight budgets as developing young minds and talents.

As chair of the North Carolina Executive Mansion Fine Arts Committee for decades, probably starting with Terry Sanford, and coming all the way following, she embellished that great Victorian home, but what she really did was help all of the governors who lived there, whether they wanted her help or not. [Laughter]

She urged us to constantly move our state forward in education, in healthcare, in the arts, in fairness and opportunity for all of our citizens. And when she first started, they didn’t have it, and they still don’t. When we as governors – Governor Perdue and all of them here could tell you this. When we as governors needed to validated a progressive initiative to build North Carolina, there was no better way than to say, “Mary Semans is for it.” And if we weren’t moving fast enough, we’d probably see Mary somewhere, maybe sit down in a quiet corner, and Mary would fix our eyes with that kind but steely look and encourage us to work harder, to do more. And if we did, as President Brodhead mentioned, we were apt to get a handwritten note thanking us.
I won’t to ask you to raise your hands, but if you’ve ever gotten one of Mary’s notes, and the – they’re coming up, especially with these grandchildren and great-grandchildren. I still have the last one she sent to me. When you read it, you felt like you were king of the world. I don’t care if every newspaper in North Carolina was cussing you, Mary said you were doing good, and you went out and did more.

Today, all of us here in this great Duke chapel should resolve to do more, to make us in North Carolina and America all that we can be and should be and must be. That’s what Mary would want.
Remarks by The Honorable William “Bill” Bell at Mary Semans Memorial, January 30, 2012

Good afternoon. It is indeed an honor and my solemn privilege to be asked by the family to speak on behalf of the Durham City Council in Memoriam of Mrs. Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans, one of the pillars our community. So many great and nice things have been said about Mrs. Semans, who so often asked you to simply call her Mary. I am sure more will be said today and in days to come about her as a person and of her many contributions. I am not sure today that I can add any more profound remarks to what is being said or has been said in her honor and memoriam.

On occasions such as this I am sure that probably most of you in attendance have your own personal recollections of Mary, which have been brought back to you since her passing.

Many have said that when they met Mrs. Semans, they felt an immediate connection, as though they already knew her. I count myself as one of those people and I remember quite vividly when I met her early on after my arrival in Durham in the late 60s after having been introduced to her by my friend, the late Benjamin Ruffin Jr. Her smile and her devotion to Durham were immediately apparent and drew me in, to want to know more about this city, that was now my new home.

It was obvious that throughout her life, she felt a strong connection to Durham and Duke University. She knew our community, and had an undying devotion to it...which accrued to the benefit of everyone who calls our great city home.

I am personally very grateful for her leadership over the years as she served on many civic and academic boards, and for her contributions to health care, to civil rights, to the arts and for the kind notes and telephone calls that she personally made to me either thanking me for an action and giving encouragement or giving me advice, in her own gentle way, on something that I may want to look into. Those, along with an almost infinite list of other contributions; will be her legacy for generations to come.

Truly, Mrs. Semans represented the heart...the goodness...that is Durham. While our hearts grieve for the loss of a compassionate and caring human being, we rejoice in knowing that she left an indelible mark on Durham that will forever shine...and frankly I believe she is one of the
persons responsible for making Durham a community that is admired throughout the state, the nation, and the world.

When asked to speak at today’s service, I was reminded of a quote by the ancient Greek statesman Pericles. He wrote, “What you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.” I believe we can all agree that the contributions made by Mrs. Semans during her lifetime are truly woven into each of us…and into the beautiful tapestry that makes Durham….well, Durham.

I also thought about the last time I had the privilege of spending some time alone with Mrs. Semans. My wife and I had attended a dinner at Ruth and Victor Dzau’s home at which Governor Hunt and his wife along with Mrs. Semans and a few others were in attendance. Afterwards my wife and I offered to take Ms. Semans home. While the drive was not very long it was an opportunity to hear so much about the history of Durham as Ms. Semans had experienced and also to hear again how much she loved Durham as a city and wouldn’t want to have lived any place else. My wife and I remarked afterwards how down to earth she was, but yet so majestic in her appearance and speech and how the sincerity of her comments radiated her affection for those things that she cared greatly about, such as Durham, Duke, Family and the Arts.

To the seven children, 16 grandchildren, and 29 great-grand children of Mrs. Semans …there were so many accomplishments, so very many successes, a wealth of hopes and dreams fulfilled, days and days and days well-lived, and now a legacy to celebrate. May sweet memories of the gem that was your mother, grand mother and great grand mother encourage you and comfort you from this point forward.

On behalf of this entire community…say not, in grief, that your mother has gone, but always remain thankful that she was yours….for we remain thankful that she was ours.

As I conclude my remarks I’d like to say that I will be presenting a Resolution Memorializing Mrs. Semans at our next City Council meeting Monday February 6, 2012.

Thank you and God bless.
Remarks by Professor Joel Fleishman at Mary Semans Memorial, January 30, 2012

A woman of valor, who can find, her worth is beyond pearls. She girds herself with strength, embraces her arms for the tasks. She reaches out her palm to the poor and extends her hand to the needy. She is clothed with strength and dignity. She can laugh at the days to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the law of kindness is on her tongue. She watches over the ways of her household, and never eats the bread of idleness. Charm is deceptive and beauty vain. It is the God-fearing woman who deserves praise. Give her the reward she has earned. Let her deeds bring her praise in the gates. That is from Proverbs 31.

Good afternoon, President Brodhead, Dean Wells, ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, especially to Mary’s children, Mary Jones, Sarah Harris, Becky Kirkland, Barbara Kimbrell, Jenny Koortbojian, James and Beth, and the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Our hearts go out to all of you. May your mother’s memory, and your grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s, be always a blessing for you and for your generations to come.

How Mary did all she did while at the same time raising and nurturing seven children is a miracle in itself. But each of her children will readily attest to the loving care they continuously received from their amazing mother, and not a small part of that ability is due to the collaborative partnerships, which she enjoyed with her late husband’s, Joe Trent and Jim Semans, and the skilled and devoted associates, both past and present, who worked with her daily. And to Mary’s staff at the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, Doug Zinn and Kathy Harrison and their colleagues, all of whom helped make it for Mary to do all that she did, we express to you our gratitude, and to you all, our heartfelt condolences.

We come here today to mourn a truly profound loss, the death of our beloved Mary Semans, who touched the lives of every one of us, directly and indirectly, through all that she did year in, year out, day in and day out. I pray that each of us will draw strength from her literally unique example of a life consistently lived with the express purpose to benefit others. Let this moment of grief over the loss we share arouse a resolve in each of us to strive with all our might to emulate some aspect of Mary’s unique human magnanimity as she devoted her life to the
I'd like to focus my remarks on Mary as a philanthropist, which is both easy and impossible to do because what Mary did as a philanthropist was seamlessly related to who Mary was as a human being. As Mary herself said in an interview 15 years ago, philanthropy is an attitude. It's a dedication to the people around you. The mark of a great philanthropist who seeks to achieve maximum impact in philanthropy is wholehearted immersion in the initiatives, which they support, while meticulously respecting the autonomy of their partners who are implementing those initiatives. In other words, the great philanthropists throw themselves, not only their money, but even more important, their time, their energy, their ideas, their friends, their contacts, their love and their vision into the initiatives to which they give financial support. And Mary was among the greatest of them all in doing so.

Mayor Bell is exactly right in describing Mary as the heart of Durham, but she was also the heart and soul of Duke, and not only in the arts. Every one of us in this great cathedral experienced Mary's love in many ways. Permit me to say a personal two words about how I did. As a Jewish member of the Duke faculty, I was struck by Mary's persistent efforts to add to Duke University programs and facilities to enable Jewish students to observe and strengthen their religious practices, while benefiting from a superb Duke education.

When former Durham mayor, Emanuel Evans, in 1971 proposed the establishment of a Duke UNC Chapel Hill Center for Jewish Studies, Mary was a member of the planning committee for that effort. Many years later, when Duke agreed to solicit support from parents and alumni to build what is now the Freeman Center for Jewish Life, guess who volunteered to serve on the original governing board for that center? She was the only Methodist on there.

Moreover, hers was not token support by simply lending her name. To everyone's surprise, and I had it confirmed to me this week by one of the members, she regularly attended the meetings of the board. She solicited money for the enterprise. And thanks, in part to Mary's support, both of those entities are thriving today.

One more personal word. One important contribution Mary made to this university may well escape notice this afternoon, so let me be the one to note it here. Without question, it was Mary Semans who was responsible for persuading Terry Sanford to be a candidate for Duke's presidency in 1969, and whose advocacy of his presidency persuaded the other Duke trustees to elect him to that post. It was pretty unusual then for a politician to be elected president of a distinguished university, and yet Duke did it, and the reason that Duke did it was, without question, because of Mary Semans.

To the end of her days, she remained proud of that achievement, which had such a profound
effect on this university’s trajectory in the world of the U.S. higher education. These and many other aspects of Mary’s legacy are all very important, but don’t let the mile-high stack of Mary’s achievements distract you from what made them possible, what powered them. For that, you must look inside her. If it is true, as Henry Ward Beecher wrote, that every artist dips his brush in his own soul and paints his own nature into his pictures, then the luster that leaps to eye from today’s Duke is straight from Mary’s soul.

She was invariably kind to and gentle with everyone, regardless of their station in life. She lived to do good for others. Indeed, she lived for others. Her own life exemplified some of humanities most praiseworthy ideals: the beauty of the arts, the protection of human dignity and equality, the furtherance of a lively, diverse, inclusive educational community, the advancement of the wider communities in which we all live. Even more important than what she did is what she was: an inspiration, an encourager, a cheerleader and a comforter to all of those in the Duke community and in the wider community who sought to bring about change for the better.

As Tom Lambeth, Mary’s longtime friend and admirer, explained to me yesterday, what a person glowing with all the richness of humanity, bent to the common good and to lighting up the world for all who encountered her and her gifts; kind, gentle and invariably humble. Even on the day that she was elected as Durham’s first woman vice mayor in 1950, a position she held for 12 years, she couldn’t bring herself to express pride in her achievement. She told Mayor Mutt Evans’ son Eli, many years later, that that was among the most exciting days of her life because she was, as she said, jumping in and going public into the arena. And even looking back, she said she tried — she had tried to say no several times. Her and local politics? How shocking it would be to her family and her friends.

But she never once mentioned how proud she was of being elected mayor to pro tem, the first female in Durham’s history to hold that position. She would never express pride; humility was one of her deepest values.

All of us know some part of the good that Mary did and for the world. But her countless acts of kindness and generosity, large and small, to countless human beings, the lowly and the mighty, and the profound humility in which she gave them, only God himself has the bandwidth to keep track of each and every one.

Henry Fielding observed two and a half centuries ago, “There cannot be a more glorious object in creation than a human being replete with benevolence, meditating in what matter to render himself most acceptable to the creator by doing good to his creatures.”

Shakespeare wrote, “In measure for measure, heaven doth with us as we with tortures do. Not light them for themselves, for if our virtues did not go forth of us, it were all alike as if we had
Magnanimity, thy name is Mary Semans. I was there the morning that Mary was to give the commencement address to the Duke class of 1983. The clouds were dark and threatening. Everyone thought it was going to rain, including the weatherman, until Mary stood up and took the podium. At that point, at that very point, the clouds parted. The sun came out bright and strong. The clouds all went away, as if to honor that woman of valor. In that speech, she urged the graduates to be examples of what she called "compassionate living". "I am pleading," she says, "for an extraordinary devotion to humanity. In addition to your employment, do something that benefits the human condition." That was Mary’s message to the graduates nearly 30 years ago, and that is her plea to us here today.

Farewell, beloved and loving Mary. May flights of angels sing thee to the rest — to thy rest in the world to come. Thank you very much.
Remarks by Thomas Kenan at Mary Semans Memorial, January 30, 2012

I can’t help, as I look out at these wonderful family members and friends, that this would thrill Mary. And knowing her as well as I did, she would probably blush a little bit. “All of these people coming for me?” But the love and energy in this chapel is overwhelming.

Yes, there is an emptiness in my heart today, a void left by the passing of a very dear friend, and a bright life in the lives of so many gathered here. My journey with this remarkable lady began when I was in the sixth grade Calvert Method School where I attended and Mary’s children. It’s a long time ago, but I want to tell you when the first time I met her, and subsequent times, at that young age, she was the same as she was to me a month ago: vibrant, kind, loving, taking time. I mean, it — she never changed. She was just the same person through all of these decades that I have known her.

It wasn’t long after that that Mary and her children and grandchildren really became my extended family. She would also become a great mentor, and through her example and encouragement, I would begin to learn what philanthropy was all about, including the right way and the long way to go about it. Largely because of her example and encouragement, I’ve had privilege and honor of serving on many charitable foundations, including the wonderful Duke endowment, the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, the Semans Art Fund, and the very small but precious Mary Duke Biddle Trent Semans Foundation, which very few people even know about, but it’s a very special one.

Now, much to Mary’s pleasure and my own, Mary’s children and even some of her grandchildren are taking up the mantle and working in those same organizations to continue their mother and grandmother’s stewardship, which made her terribly proud.

Though we worked together for many great and worthy causes, my greatest joy was following in her footsteps, working in support of an institution that she helped establish, the University of North Carolina School of the Arts. Now, Mary have been married to Duke University, and I think she was, but she loved the University of North Carolina’s system of public higher
education. She talked about it several times in the last year or two.

She was very proud. She loved Duke immensely, but she was proud of the state system, the first – the oldest public university – public-supported university in the country. She was enormously proud of that.

Mary and her husband Jim poured all of their energy into this first publicly supported conservatory to include music, dance and drama, and later to add schools of design and film. Mary herself almost singlehandedly, with the help of Jim, established the international music program, which allowed the brightest stars of the music programs of the School of the Arts and other leading conservatories the chance to spend their summer break touring and performing across Italy.

Inspired by Mary and Jim’s efforts, my own father, who was an early founder and member of the board of the school, suggested that I go along pro bono to assist and help wherever I could. Well, you know, you don’t refuse your father, and you don’t refuse Mary when she says, “Come on along with us.” With orchestras of 60 to 80 musicians in tow, opportunities to help were never in short supply. The School of the Arts, as it was originally called, in the early years, was often referred to as the “impossible dream” because so many of the founders, Terry Sanford, John Ehle, they said, “This is really going to be a very hard nut to crack. I don’t know whether we can really get this going.”

But Mary frequently, in past years, would say, “Oh, the impossible dream.” Mary made this dream come true. Her skill in building and leading was truly remarkable. And besides my father, I think I learned the most from Mary. They both loved each other. They both worked in philanthropy, but they were different. But Mary was – well, she was different. She – I could never say no. If she said, “I want you to try this. Do that.” I just did it. I never regretted it.

This year would have been the 38th year that Mary and I would have found ourselves seated at the same table at the School of the Arts in Winston-Salem. Listening to students, artists, faculty, staff and many chancellors, she would follow the careers of these students, and she never stopped giving support. It was just amazing. Often she would say to me, “Do you remember so and so? He was the violinist. He’s now in Chicago. I wrote him a letter. I think I’m going to send him a little birthday present because he’s having a rough time.” [Laughter] Really, she knew the names.

When Mary would walk across the campus, I felt so embarrassed because she was calling, “John, Mary, Sue, Phillip.” She knew them all. I knew a few. But – and then they all came rushing up to her. She was the beautiful and magnificent pied piper of Hamlet. The students just flocked to her.
You’re going to hear some of the students today. The school – two busloads of students and faculty and staff came down today. It is a tearful day at the School of the Arts. But we can smile and sing because it is – because what it is, because of her. She will always be considered the mother of the University of North Carolina’s School of the Arts. She was the bright light that led the way in the school’s founding, and would continue for more than 45 years as the leading advocate in support of this amazing impossible dream.

It’s now up to those who knew and loved her, to see that her light continues to shine. As these wonderful speakers preceding me said, to shine brightly and the wonderful legacy that she leaves behind. As you leave this chapel to embrace her family, may we commit ourselves to keeping Mary’s memory alive and vigorous, by striving as she did, just to make the world a little more beautiful and a little more welcoming place to everyone in it.

Thank you so much.