



Eastern Connecticut State University

NEWS

August 29, 2008

For Immediate Release

Contact: Dwight Bachman

Public Relations Officer

(860) 465-5114 or Bachman@easternct.edu

Edward Osborn, Director of University Relations

(860) 465-5043 or Osborne@easternct.edu

Eastern Opens Year with Record Freshman Class

Willimantic, Conn. — A record 1,649 freshmen will join the ranks of Eastern Connecticut State University's student body when classes start on Sept. 2. With all undergraduate and graduate students included, the University will serve more than 5,300 students this year.

Eastern formally opened its academic year on Aug. 29 with a Convocation ceremony in the Francis E. Geissler Sports Center Gymnasium. During the ceremony, Eastern conferred an honorary degree on Michael J. Thomas, chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation.

In giving her charge to the Class of 2012, Eastern President Elsa Núñez told the entering students of some of the unique aspects of Eastern's public liberal arts education that they would experience during their four years at the University. "The liberal arts gives us the freedom to think for ourselves, to engage in intellectual discovery. People who are willing to question authority and seek answers to tough questions are fundamental to upholding our democratic freedoms." Núñez told the students that they would also learn more about other cultures, and the importance of serving those less fortunate than themselves. And she gave the this charge: "Close your eyes with me for a moment. I am envisioning a day in May 2012 when we are together again for commencement exercises. I can see each of you walking across the stage as I congratulate you on your achievement. I want you to commit to being there with me that day, decked out in your mortar board and gown. It will be a great day, another day of beginnings."

-more-

Marsha Davis, professor of mathematics and Eastern's 2008 Distinguished Professor, delivered the keynote address. Describing Michael Phelps, winner of eight Olympic gold medals, as someone whose talent was reinforced by hard work, the support of family, and the efforts of teammates, she said, "Talent is overrated. Achieving your goals requires a great deal of hard work. College is not about checking off the boxes indicating you have completed your requirements. It's about reaching your potential, pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone."

Other speakers included David Carter, chancellor of the Connecticut State University System (CSUS); CSUS Board of Trustees Chairman Lawrence McHugh; Rhona Free, vice president for academic affairs; Paul Bryant, acting vice president for student affairs; Sulthana Sayed, president of Eastern's Student Government Association; Jaime Bondi, senior class president; and Town of Windham First Selectman Jean de Smet.

Eastern students continued the University's "Make a Wish" tradition of taking a ceremonial walk through the Foster Clock tower, tossing a coin into a fountain on the North Campus, and making a wish for their success in college. The same ritual, using the same coins, is repeated by each graduating class at their commencement exercises.

In conferring an honorary doctorate in humane letters on Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Chairman Michael Thomas, Núñez acknowledged his leadership, not only in serving the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, but the entire state of Connecticut. Thomas was elected chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Council in November 2002. In 2006, he was re-elected to a full term as Council chairman, and is serving his sixth term on the Council.

Under Thomas's leadership, the Tribe has initiated a significant strategic planning initiative and begun a community and resort master plan process that has launched the Tribe into

a substantial expansion of its gaming enterprise. Thomas successfully competed for off-reservation resort and gaming development in some of the most competitive markets, including the Philadelphia River Front, and brought to fruition the MGM Grand at Foxwoods, a \$700 million project that has created new jobs and new revenue for the region and attracted some of the nation's biggest entertainers since it opened this past MAY.

During his tenure, the Tribe's Foxwoods Resort Casino has helped counter the loss of defense industry jobs in southeastern Connecticut by providing gainful employment to thousands of local residents, resulting in a revenue-sharing program that transfers \$2.7 billion annually to the State of Connecticut treasury.

Prior to stepping into the political arena, Thomas pursued a career as an environmentalist, and was one of only a few Native Peoples to be certified in safe food preparation and handling by the State of Connecticut. He headed up the Tribe's Natural Resources Department, and was later elected president of the Native American Fish and Wildlife Society (NAFWS), to which he has devoted more than 20 years of service and support.

During his time as Tribal chair, Thomas has encouraged the Mashantucket Pequot to support Eastern Connecticut State University with a tribal gift of \$500,000 to support University academic programs. He has also served on the board of directors of Connecticut Public Television and the University of Connecticut Foundation, and currently serves on the board of directors of the Russell Simmons RUSH Philanthropic Arts Foundation.

###

Eastern Connecticut State University is part of the Connecticut State University (CSU) system and is the state's public liberal arts university. ECSU serves more than 5,000 students each year on its Willimantic campus.