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Lorraine Branham Funeral Service

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Recommended Citation

Syverud, Kent, "Lorraine Branham Funeral Service" (2019). *Chancellor's Office (2004 - 2013)*. 206.
<https://surface.syr.edu/chancellor/206>

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud
Delivered on Thursday, April 11, 2019
Location: Sharon Baptist Church, Philadelphia, PA
Remarks: Lorraine Branham Funeral Service

*The Chancellor was introduced by a friend of Branham family,
Roy Campbell*

Lorraine Branham came to Syracuse University 11 years ago to become Dean of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. She was recruited to Syracuse under my predecessor, Nancy Cantor, with the help of the Newhouse family, the faculty, and the Newhouse alumni. I am deeply grateful to all of them for bringing Lorraine to Syracuse, because she was a giant leader who transformed our school.

Lorraine was a journalist who, all her life, believed in knowing facts and facing them squarely. She was fiercely loyal to people and institutions she believed in, and there were a lot of them. They included foremost her husband, Mel Williams, her son Jabaar Branham, her granddaughter, Jasmine Branham, her extended family, her students, her faculty, and her professions of journalism, communication, and education.

Lorraine was a forceful leader. She asked penetrating questions and she actually listened to the answers. She was a shepherd more than a CEO, but what a magnificent and unique kind of shepherd she was. First, she treated every one of her flock – her students, her faculty, her staff – like unique decent human beings, each one of whom had the capacity to grow and improve and work wonders if given the chance. She respected people, all kinds of people, and she believed in truth.

Second, when Lorraine was the shepherd, you did not want to be no wolf. If you threatened the people or values Lorraine believed in, she would look you in the eye, pick you up and shake you with her facts and her analysis, turn you around 180 degrees, and send you packing with a smile.

I experienced a mild form of this early in my tenure at Syracuse five years ago. I was with Lorraine and Mel at a football game. Lorraine quickly demonstrated she knew more about football than I did. I asked her whether Syracuse's football team would ever be ranked in the top 20. She looked directly at me and said "Yes, Chancellor, when you get the right coach."

I changed the subject. By the way, it was a mistake to try to change the subject with Dean Branham when she had something important to tell you. But, I tried. I asked Lorraine about the rankings of communications and journalism schools. Lorraine told me, in no uncertain terms, that there were no good rankings of communications schools. They measured the wrong things. What a communication school should be measured by, Lorraine said, was whether the students really learned to write well and think well and find and tell a good story; whether the faculty made a difference for their students and the world; whether the school taught integrity and change; whether the alumni did things to make the world proud. That's the ranking you should care about, Chancellor, she said.

A week later, I attended an event at the Newhouse School for parents, freshmen, faculty and staff. Lorraine greeted me and strode to the podium. She told the crowd: I'm Lorraine Branham, Dean of the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. Then she smiled, looked right at me, and said: Yes, I'm Dean at Newhouse, the number one school of communications in the country.

Lorraine taught me a lot about leadership and shepherding that day. And what an amazing set of miracles her shepherding accomplished.

She led the school into new media and professions while holding true to its roots in journalism.

She built amazing new programs, including in NY and LA, in innovation, in Digital Media and Entrepreneurship.

She fostered the careers of so many students and faculty, including so many women and people of color.

She created new state of the art facilities and studios and labs. I watched her dedicate a huge set of them on a stage not long ago with Oprah Winfrey and it was clear to me then Lorraine as much as Oprah was the star on that stage.

The last time I saw Dean Lorraine Branham was at the beginning of this semester, at the Camping World Bowl in Orlando, where Syracuse was playing West Virginia in football. Lorraine was ill and struggling, but she was upright and clear-eyed and, as always, facing facts.

I asked her if we would win. She turned, faced me and said: of course we'll win. You got the right coach. And we'll end up ranked in the top 20 too.

We won. We ended up ranked 15th. Lorraine, as usual, was right.

Mel, Jabaar, Jasmine, family, Newhouse and Philadelphia and Syracuse community: I am so grateful we all were blessed by God with Lorraine Branham, the right coach, and one tough and deeply decent shepherd.

Thank you.

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