Howard, it is an honor to be asked to offer some thanks and some hurrahs from your students.

Some of us have been sharing our thoughts. There are many memories and many tributes—and some clear themes.

Your own work has involved a much larger canvass than Washington, DC. But this is a Washington honor, so that is the focus of my remarks. Your time at GW was a heady time in many ways because we had the feeling we were all working together in a field that was ripe for discovery. Washington had been neglected by scholars in the relatively new fields of urban and social history. It was hard to answer the key questions being asked about urban government in a city that had no locally elected government, questions about ethnic mobility in a city that was more black and white then defined by ethnic enclaves, and questions about industry in a city with little of it. And it was hard to test models in a city that was unique—neither North or South but both.

You were at the heart of a movement that said, wait a minute, there is rich territory for discovery here. You created a framework for that to happen. And then you opened the doors to our ideas. What encouraged and sometimes surprised us was that you saw value in topics about which we ourselves were not so sure. But you helped us put those topics in a meaningful context, led us to sources, and then steered us into the ways of the rigorous scholarship that you brought to our own work.
Could ethnic festivals, church history, neighborhood change, civic action, transportation patterns, local art and the like provide valuable insights into the character of a federal capital? You showed us how, with the right framework and careful research they could be. One of your students said, “Your enthusiasm for the city was infectious.” Another said, “Howard Legitimized Washington as a topic for MA theses and doctoral dissertations.”

I think I reflect a common consensus that it was all so engaging because you allowed us to feel that our teacher and mentor was doing it with us. We watched you publish your own pioneering work, including Between Justice and Beauty. We felt we were becoming a community of scholars in that spirit.

Your students have gone on to publish significant research that is enriching many related academic fields. You also encouraged many of us to put what we had learned to work in the public sphere. Your students have gone to work as museum curators and administrators, civic activists with a sense of history, historical society staff and board members, tour guides, writers and editors, oral historians, neighborhood historians, and interpreters of Washington art. You really did spearhead a phenomenon with lasting value to the city and to the field.

Some who consider you their teacher and mentor were not students at GW, but scholars at other institutions in other cities who knew that if they had an idea for a Washington topic, they needed to check with you. You had the knowledge of the field and the deep networks to know who was doing what, and where the resources were. And you were generous with what you knew, and with your time.

Some of your GW students also remember that you stayed with them past graduation and encouraged them as they moved into their professional lives in the field. One wrote to me, “Generous with his time and sound in his advice, he has been a model of excellence throughout my life.” It was my own good fortune
to move from student to a colleague of Howard’s at this Historical Society and in the editing of Washington History magazine.

There was another unique dynamic going on at GW for a particular group of students in the mid-1980s to the 1990s. May I say that we were “mature students”—in age if not academic capacity. My own appearance might suggest I am totally the wrong generational cohort to be a student of Howard’s. But a group of us mostly in our 40s, went back to school and found our niche in the GW American Studies Department. It was challenging—some of us were not sure we could handle it, frankly. But it was energizing and fun to be beginning second careers, or to be deepening our credentials in old ones. You inspired and encouraged and we grew. On the lighter side, one remembers how much fun it was “just to come downtown in our jeans and drink coffee out of paper cups.” We were a very special band, and many of us are friends and colleagues today.

We have all benefitted from your special skills, Howard, in networking with others in the field, bringing together diverse points of view, opening new ways of thinking—and, as one said, introducing like-minded scholars to ensure collaboration rather than competition. Open to new ideas, generous with your time, and as this award recognizes, visionary in your thinking, you not only fashioned a new field of study, you created rare community.

Thank you from all of us!