

Citation for Gene Nichol, Thomas Jefferson Award winner of 2013

Presented to the Faculty Council on 5 October 2013

Colleagues:

It gives me great pleasure to present Professor Gene Nichol to you as the recipient of the 2013 Thomas Jefferson Award. Professor Nichol is Boyd Tinsley Distinguished Professor of Law and Director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity here at UNC. Through his work with that Center, and through his written and spoken public testimony, he has done more than any other academic figure in recent days to publicize the plight of the poor in North Carolina. There is to my mind a lamentable tendency among our political leaders, both Democrat and Republican, to ignore the poor as a group with no influence. Professor Nichol speaks for that group, and through his testimony makes visible the sufferings that they endure. If Thomas Jefferson were here today, he could not be more eloquent in speaking truth to power, and in educating the ignorant to this fundamental ethical and policy problem of our state.

There is just one criterion for the Thomas Jefferson Award. It is presented each year to “that member of the [UNC] academic community who through personal influence and performance of duty in teaching, writing, and scholarship

has best exemplified the ideals and objectives of Thomas Jefferson.” There are many facets to the Thomas Jefferson we now know: farmer, legislator, university president, author of the Declaration of Independence. The most important of these, I would argue, motivated the sentence that galvanized the signers of the Declaration: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” A sentence for the ages: simple to write, simple to affirm – and, as it turns out, simple to ignore.

As citation author, I am condemned to repeat Professor Nichol’s history – but let me be brief. Early in his career as an academic he held distinguished chairs in law at the College of William and Mary and the University of Colorado; he served as Dean of the Law School at the latter. He first appeared on the UNC campus as the Burton Craige Professor and Dean of the UNC Law School in 1999. He created the Center for Civil Rights at UNC in 2001. In 2005 he accepted appointment as the 26th president of the College of William and Mary. After a remarkable turn of events in Williamsburg, he returned to UNC campus in 2008 as Boyd Tinsley Distinguished Professor of Law and Director of the Center on Poverty, Work and Opportunity. It was there, in my opinion, that he found the “home” of which Toni Morrison speaks.

The Center of Poverty, Work and Opportunity at UNC has a straightforward mission statement: it is a non-partisan, interdisciplinary institute designed to study, examine, document, and advocate for proposals, policies and services to mitigate poverty in North Carolina and the nation. While it began in 2005, and had two directors prior to Professor Nichol's arrival, it has taken on a distinctive identity since Professor Nichol took the lead. It has convened academic conferences on the causes and consequences of poverty. It has convened working groups of policy makers and academics to debate policy proposals to alleviate poverty. It has brought "the poor" to campus, so that those in the ivory tower must confront a fundamental disconnect: how can people who were created equal have become so unequal in practice?

I have been on the Board of Advisors of this Center since its inception in 2005. We have had capable administrators, and well-conceived research plans, and well-received conferences. Until Gene Nichol, though, we had not had a leader who presented our mission in such stark and coherent terms. Nor had we had anyone as relentless in pursuing our mission.

The best example of Gene Nichol's single-mindedness was his participation in the 2012 Truth and Hope Tour of Poverty. The Tour of Poverty in North Carolina was organized to put a face on the thousands of families and individuals

in the state struggling to get by -- to get beyond the statistics and hear stories from North Carolinians directly affected by poverty and hardship. He traveled the state with leaders of non-profits and church groups, and at each stop he brought the bright light of public attention to the dark truth of poverty of those within our midst. Jefferson would be proud: confronting the fact of poverty with the truth that we are all created equal. Can there be any better way to spend your weekends? More comfortable, certainly – but better, no.

I consider the Thomas Jefferson Award to be one of the most prestigious awards that we as faculty can offer to one among us. To be “Jeffersonian” is to be an individual with questing intellect, with public conscience, with a preference for action to redress injustice. I am pleased that this year we recognize Professor Gene Nichol as an exemplar of those traits.

Patrick Conway

1 October 2013