

'Walsh really changed me.' University's first-ever student returns as commencement speaker

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Key Points

- Willis "Bill" Rambo graduated from Central Catholic in 1960. His family was insistent he further his education in college.
 - Rambo was the first person to apply to attend a new formed Walsh College. He was the first registered student.
 - Sixty years after graduating from Walsh, he returns to give the commencement speech to the Class of 2024.
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NORTH CANTON – Willis "Bill" Rambo wasn't sure what he wanted to do after finishing high school.

The 1960 Central Catholic grad knew one thing: His parents and grandparents insisted he go to college.

"We weren't dirt poor but we didn't have much," Rambo said. "But then Walsh came to town. It was the right opportunity."

He became the first student to apply and be registered 64 years ago at the newly formed Walsh College, which later became Walsh University.

Looking back, Rambo admitted he was too young to know what was cheap or expensive when it came to higher education. He recalled his grandparents helped with tuition so he could be the first from his family to go to college.

Rambo, a member of the first Walsh graduating class in 1964, will return to his alma mater on Saturday to deliver the commencement address to the Class of 2024. He also will receive an honorary doctorate of business during the ceremony.

More: Walsh University's Tim Collins: Higher education continues to build tomorrow's leaders

More inaugural class members will attend, including Sean Keenan, Jerry Perry and the family of Michael Rosso. Others will join via livestream.

"Walsh University celebrates Bill's remarkable career achievements and unwavering commitment to the values and mission of our institution," President Tim Collins said in a statement.

"His exceptional life of servant leadership exemplifies what Walsh's founders, the Brothers of Christian Instruction, instilled in their students, that continues to be woven into the fabric of our work today. We honor the Brothers' legacy by honoring Bill for his unwavering dedication to advance our Catholic mission and help us serve our network of more than 17,000 alumni, as an education partner for life."

Walsh College's early roots in North Canton

Walsh was a vision of the Brothers of Christian Instruction.

They turned 50 acres of alfalfa field at Market Avenue N and Easton Street NE into a college campus with two buildings. Construction delays and final charter approval by the Ohio Board of Regents forced a late start to the fall semester.

The seven founding Brothers, who comprised the faculty, welcomed 67 men on Nov. 17, 1960, and began what would become six decades of faith, learning and expansion.

"The Brothers of Christian Instruction's mission was the education of children after the French Revolution — the street children," the 82-year-old Rambo said. "The children who didn't have a chance for an education. They carried that through the years. I was a product of that mission."

Bill Rambo: 'Walsh really changed me.'

Rambo said his grades at Central weren't great. The only time he met with his counselor in his senior year, he was told he shouldn't waste his time on college.

"I was more interested in playing golf," he recalled. "Walsh really changed me. I took it more seriously. I wanted to show that counselor that he was wrong."

Rambo fondly remembered his time at Walsh, which switched from a college to a university in 1993. There were no dorms. He lived at his parents' home along Raff Road, but didn't own a car so he had to beg for rides.

In its early days, the liberal arts college had no traditions and no sports teams, Rambo said. He and a classmate approached the dean to see if they could start a golf team. He agreed. The team had a winning season his junior year.

Today, Walsh offers 12 men's sports and 13 women's sports.

Rambo wasn't sure of his career path but knew he didn't want to be a teacher. At Walsh, there were a lot of philosophy and theology classes. He later settled on studying history.

Upon graduation, Rambo had plans to go to U.S. Marine Corps officer school but a hernia delayed his entry. Instead, he signed up for the Ohio National Guard.

"They weren't worried about my hernia," he said with a laugh.

But it wasn't a great time in the U.S. It was the height of the Vietnam War and many men were nervous about being called up to serve.

As a guardsman, Rambo recalled at least three different riots in Cleveland and Youngstown that his unit was called in for.

"It was an interesting period of time," he said.

He went into the insurance industry after graduation

He eventually made his way to Cleveland, where he met his wife, Trina, and began his career in the insurance business.

Rambo spent 35 years in property and casualty insurance across Ohio, Michigan and Florida. He served 15 years as vice president of Brown + Brown and president of its subsidiary, MacDuff Underwriters until his retirement in 2000.

His career reached a pinnacle in 1997 with the founding of the Florida Surplus Lines Service Office, where he played a pivotal role as its first vice chairman and later chair, establishing it as an industry self-regulatory body for excess and surplus lines insurance in Florida.

'And forever will be, true to Walsh, true to Thee.'

Just as the school's alma mater goes "And forever will be, true to Walsh, true to Thee," the Daytona Beach, Florida, resident remains loyal to his alma mater. As he gets older, his commitment has become more significant.

"My experiences at Walsh, particularly the mentorship of the Brothers, have profoundly shaped my life," he said.

He recalled a dean, Brother Robert Francoeur, who mentored him. Francoeur was one of the seven founding Brothers who later became president of Walsh College from 1971-77.

"I respected him. He was a very good man," Rambo said. "I felt important just because he talked to me. He took an interest."

He credited that type of interaction between staff and students as a reason for the school's success.

"They pay attention to the students as individuals, and that's important," Rambo said. "I don't think their mission has changed at all and there is more and more opportunity."

Walsh University: New students embracing mentorship of First Gen Cavs program

The size of the physical campus today, as well as the opportunities such as athletics and cutting-edge majors, surpasses anything he could imagine as a student walking into the two-building campus in 1960. Today, the university has about 2,300 students.

"It's just amazing just how lucky they are with all the opportunities," he said. "I think if I would have had all that when I was there, I am not sure what I would have done. It would have been very interesting. Experiencing all of that would have been amazing."

Today, the school, named for then Catholic Diocese of Youngstown Bishop, the Most Rev. Emmet Walsh, boasts 27 buildings and more than 300 faculty and staff. There are students

from 37 states and 24 countries.

Rambo family gives back to Walsh University

The Rambos have impacted the university and its growth. In 2016, they established the Rambo Family Advanced Nursing Lab and the Rambo Family Endowed Scholarship. They also endowed the Trina Rambo R.N, Dean's Chair of the Byers School of Nursing.

They also initiated the Rambo Global Health Scholar's Program, which aids students in exploring diverse health care landscapes through global experiences.

Bill Rambo: Walsh University receives largest donation in history

Trini Rambo is a registered nurse; and their three daughters became nurses.

In 2020, the Rambos contributed to infrastructure upgrades with the Bill Rambo Admissions Center.

It's possible one of Rambos' five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren could be future Cavaliers.

During his trip, one granddaughter will accompany him to campus. She's interested in checking out the campus.

A message to the Class of 2024

Rambo said he would keep his remarks to the graduating students short.

He'll share his experience as a 17-year-old, first-generation college student and his time at Walsh.

"I'm not going to tell them what to do but hopefully they will make things happen," Rambo said. "Like myself, I want them to continue doing God's work."

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