

# Carrying the Mace

FORMER UNIVERSITY MARSHAL DR. PELHAM WILDER, JR.,  
TALKS ABOUT DUKE'S BACCALAUREATE TRADITION.

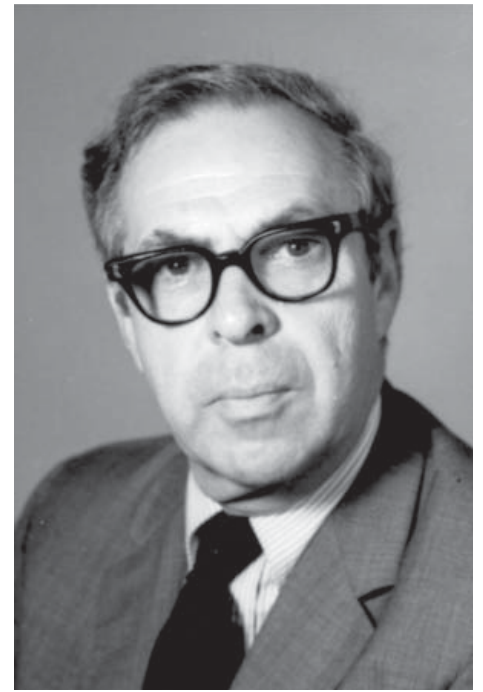
*by Mandie Sellars, Manager of Chapel Communications*

May at Duke Chapel brings about the excitement of graduation, with a whirlwind of activity that includes three baccalaureate services over the course of two days.

The term “baccalaureate” comes from a custom in medieval Europe of presenting bachelor’s (bacca) degree candidates with laurels (lauri), generally through the delivery of a sermon. The first baccalaureate service was held at Oxford University in 1432, with each degree candidate delivering a sermon in Latin as part of the graduation ceremony. 2008 marked the 75th anniversary of baccalaureate services at Duke University.

The well-known Duke baccalaureate service gathers together many Duke dignitaries, but it wouldn’t be complete without the processing of the University Marshal, the famous carrier of the mace. One of the most fondly remembered University Marshals at Duke was Dr. Pelham Wilder, Jr., who, from 1977-2000, served as marshal and as Duke’s first – and only, to date – chief of protocol.

“The Chief of Protocol doesn’t exist anymore, but they still call me with protocol questions,” said Wilder of the current Duke staff. He willingly advises on how to handle difficult seating arrange-



*Dr. Pelham Wilder, Jr. during his tenure at Duke.*

ments for formal dinners, how to properly introduce visiting dignitaries, and even how to correctly address a letter to an ambassador.

As University Marshal, Wilder assisted



*Graduates wait outside ready to process into Duke Chapel for a baccalaureate service.*

in planning major university events, such as graduation, opening convocation, and Founder's Day. Wilder, because of his background in medical research, chemistry, and pharmacology, also assisted in planning medical events as well, such as the dedication of Duke Hospital North and the Duke Eye Center.

However, the major annual events that make Duke very unique are its extremely well-attended Baccalaureate services, which still follow a worship tradition, complete with a sermon delivered by the Dean of the Chapel.

"The Dean has delivered the sermon for the past twenty or more years, but before then we had guest preachers such as George Butterick, David H.C. Read, and Peter Gomes," said Wilder.

"We have over 7,500 people attend our baccalaureate services, compared with Stanford's 500," said Wilder. Several years ago, then Duke President Nan Keohane called a committee, which included Wilder and then-Chapel Dean Will Willimon, to consider changing the format. After four meetings that didn't go particularly well, it was finally decided by a Jewish undergraduate student who said, "If 7,500 people are going to this, there must be something good about it. Let's not upset something that's already good."

The service is so popular each year that tickets are a coveted item. Each student gets only three tickets, and one year, Wilder remembers a student was found at Kinko's counterfeiting tickets.

To accommodate the demand, the number of baccalaureates held each year has gone up over time. There was only one service until 1973, from 1973-1977, there were two, and after 1977, there were three. Students had asked for a fourth service, but Wilder cleverly responded, "My bottom and my mind will not permit me to sit through a sermon four times."



*The Duke University mace sits in front of the altar during a Sunday morning worship when President Brodhead served as lector.*

During his tenure as University Marshal, Wilder worked closely with former Duke President Terry Sanford. One memorable time during Baccalaureate, Wilder caught Sanford attempting to edit a scripture passage with a green pen. Wilder grabbed the pen away, saying "I don't give a damn who you are, you don't edit scripture!"

Though he is now several years retired, Wilder remembers his time carrying the ceremonial mace with fondness. It is 18 lbs of sterling silver, and when it isn't being used, it is kept safely in a vault.

"The mace represents the authority of the university, and the chain represents the authority of the president," said Wilder.

The mace and chain were commissioned in 1970 for Sanford's inauguration as

president of Duke. Since then, six or seven universities that Wilder remembers have inquired as to how to have a similar one made.

In 2000, Wilder retired from being University Marshal, and passed the torch on to Richard White. His daughter Sterly Wilder, now executive director of alumni affairs and assistant University Marshal, remains active assisting the University Marshal's office and Secretary's office with major University events.

Wilder's son, Pelham Wilder III, set up a Chapel endowment in Wilder and his late wife Sterly's honor that provides much-needed support for bringing renowned guest preachers to Duke Chapel each year. We are grateful to him and to his sisters for their ongoing support for the Chapel.