Before beginning I would be remiss if I didn't pause and thank each of you for the wonderful welcome Patsy and I have received. We consider ourselves extraordinarily fortunate to be a part of Ferris State University and are delighted to be a part of the Big Rapids community. We truly believe this is the place we are supposed to be. Thank you so much for your warm, kind hospitality.

It is a pleasure to share with you today some thoughts about the United Way and the difference it makes for the people in our community. As a way of beginning I'm interested in the history of your involvement with the United Way. How many of you have been involved with the United Way for five years? Ten years? Fifteen years? Twenty years? I think we'll stop there before some of us begin to feel really old, but you've confirmed what I already expected. In what I have come to see as a definite pattern during my first three months in Big Rapids, once again I am talking to a group who knows more about my subject than I do.

In preparing these ideas I've taken inspiration from a bit of local history that you may not know. This involves the experience of the noted sleuth, Sherlock Holmes and his friend Dr. Watson, on their camping trip to northern Michigan. Holmes and Watson had collected all the necessary camping equipment, a tent, sleeping bags, canteens, and a fine collection of cooking utensils. They began their first night in camp with a wonderful dinner, beautiful steaks grilled over a campfire, baked potatoes, corn on the cob, and some wonderful Dutch oven cobbler for dessert. After dinner they retired to their tent and sleeping bags for a good night's sleep in preparation for their first day of fishing and hiking in the forest.

About 3 am Holmes nudged Watson, waking him from a sound sleep. Dr. Watson, he inquired, what do you make of the heavens overhead? Watson yawned and then proceeded to describe what he saw in great detail. The moon is in its final quarter and the planets Jupiter and Mars are in clear view. On this clear night thousands of stars are visible and we can see the constellations of Andromeda, Aquarius, and Cassiopea. Beyond them I see the Milky Way galaxy. Surely in this great firmament the hand of the Almighty is at work. Why, what do you see Mr. Holmes, he inquired. Holmes, ever the analytical sleuth that he was, replied, It's elementary my dear Watson, I see that someone has stolen our tent.

Sometimes it is easy to forget the obvious when it is right before us. Although you may know the United Way and have worked with it for a significant period of time, my experience is that we often take things for granted and forget the difference this makes for our community. The United Way improves people's lives by mobilizing the caring power of our community.
If your desk is like mine, I have yet to see a week go by without a request for financial support for what I view is a worthy cause. Embedded in this constant stream of requests is a strong reason to support the United Way. Part of the genius of the United Way is that it combines into one request many of the humanitarian efforts that make such a difference for the people of our community. This united effort allows the provider organizations to focus their attention on their helping mission while the United Way provides the coordinated, mobilizing community effort for funding. As a result the costs and the overhead are low, and the benefits are great.

In thinking about my involvement with the United Way I am drawn back to our home in Portales, Mexico. Portales is a town similarly sized to Big Rapids, and if you were to replace our beautiful hillsides and forests with sand dunes and tumbleweeds, there aren't really that many differences. This was a time of economic slowdown and reduced resources not unlike what we face today and also a time when I found myself as president of the United Way. What I learned was that it is in precisely these troubled times that the United Way is needed the most. As a community we were able to dig down deeply and help meet the needs of those less fortunate than ourselves.

As I looked at the materials for the Mecosta Osceola United Way I was struck by the similarity of the organizations supported with those in my memory, and the difference they make for our people. Helping youth, feeding and caring for our elderly, dealing with the effects of poverty and disaster, strengthening families, and helping those who need it most, the United Way makes a difference. It truly makes our community a better place to live.

In many ways my comments today might be considered in the context of the minister speaking to his choir. You are the leaders of the United Way. We depend upon leadership, organizational skills, and powers of persuasion to help us meet our goal. For me what you do represents the true strengths of our country and our democracy. The United Way is people working to help people. It is an effort that makes a difference and one of which we can all be proud. I know that each of you will do your best to help our communities meet this goal.

As an academic I have attended more commencement activities than I can count, probably way over one hundred. Candidly I cannot recall what was said at any of those graduation ceremonies, save one. One May we had the Utah chemical industrialist John Huntsman as our commencement speaker. I remember his remarks as if it were yesterday. Reaching the podium, he turned to our president and said, "I'm supposed to deliver a speech to commencement today. Here it is," he said, handing his speaking notes to the president. Turning to the graduates and audience, he asked them to repeat the following phrase, "No exercise is greater for the human heart than reaching down and helping someone up." "No exercise is greater for the human heart than reaching down and helping someone up."

During the next eight weeks I would encourage you to remember this simple statement. Thank you so much for your help and commitment to the United Way, through your efforts, you truly make your caring count.