Good morning, and thank you for being a part of the official opening of the Jim Crow Museum. I’m Dave Eisler, President of Ferris State University.

Today is a day for both joy and deep reflection. For years we have sought to create a facility that would make the exhibits in the Jim Crow Museum more accessible to the public. This is a museum that uses objects of intolerance to teach understanding and promote social justice. Today that dream is a reality and I thank you for joining us for this celebration.

Confronting the objects themselves is a sobering and moving experience. The range and volume of material, and the knowledge that hateful things continue to be produced, is difficult to comprehend. This museum can inspire us to do better. The philosopher and poet George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” The Jim Crow Museum experience provides that ability to remember.

Before I introduce the museum’s founder, I’d like us to take a few minutes to view a powerful video about the museum. In tracing the history of the museum, the video documents what an important teaching resource this collection has become, and how much more effective it can be in its new home. Like the museum itself, the video contains some disturbing images. As you watch, I encourage you to think about ways the Jim Crow Museum will now be able to advance our conversations about race, diversity and inclusion, not just here on campus, but in communities across the state and beyond.

[VIDEO]

Now it is my pleasure to introduce Dr. David Pilgrim. In 2007 I tapped Dr. Pilgrim to lead our University’s diversity efforts and his leadership has helped transform Ferris State University. Today he serves as Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion and is an indispensable member of my leadership team. It is his collection of racist memorabilia, which he donated to the university, and perhaps more importantly his vision of what these artifacts could help become, which formed the basis for the Jim Crow Museum.

In his remarkable essay, “The Garbage Man: Why I Collect Racist Objects,” Dr. Pilgrim writes, “I collect this garbage because I believe, and know to be true, that items of intolerance can be used to teach tolerance.” Today’s opening of a public facility that allows the objects he has collected to tell their stories is, I believe, proof that he is right. In his essay he recalls buying his first racist object while he was still very young. He bought it so he could break it. Later, he
realized that it is far more difficult, but ultimately more valuable, to face the truth embodied in such terrible things and use that truth to try to make the world a better place.

His vision of an education that is accessible for all and a University committed to making the world a better place echo the words of our founder, Woodbridge Ferris, and are at the core of who we are and what we do at Ferris State University.

David holds a doctorate in Sociology from Ohio State University. His work in the classroom earned him distinction as a recipient of our Distinguished Teacher Award. He continues his teaching today through his writing, speaking engagements, and of course through the Jim Crow Museum.

Written on the wall as you enter the Jim Crow Museum is what has been one of David’s goals, “to create a room that when people come into that room, it changes the way they talk about race.” When you view the expanded Jim Crow Museum you will know that today, as his vision becomes a reality that he has indeed succeeded and far surpassed this. Today is truly a moment he has worked his entire life to realize. Please welcome Dr. David Pilgrim.