



## Keynote Address

# Meet

# Ronald A. Crutcher

*By Martha Hilley, NCTM*

**R**onald A. Crutcher, former president of the University of Richmond, will give the keynote address at the 2022 MTNA National Conference. Crutcher was president of Wheaton College from 2004–2014. Prior to Wheaton, he was provost and executive vice president for academic affairs at Miami University. Earlier in his career he was president of Chamber Music America, director of the highly ranked Butler School of Music at the University of Texas at Austin and dean of the conservatory at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Please join me in welcoming him to *AMT*.

**Martha Hilley (MH): Ron, welcome to *American Music Teacher*. We are going to start where it all began—the age you discovered music?**

**Ronald Crutcher (RC):** I discovered the joy of making music at age 6. My BYPU [Baptist Young People's Union] teacher said to me, "You will sing *Holy Bible Book Divine* at evening service." I had no idea I had any musical talent—everybody sang in the black church! I sang that evening, and everyone was oohing and aahing, and of course, I loved the adulation. Singing was my outlet for making music. I took piano lessons on the side. I sang in a young people's gospel group. Then, in junior high, I was selected to sing in the Samuel Ach choir. I didn't know that it was one of the best choirs in Ohio.



One day, the band director came in and asked if there was anybody interested in learning to play an instrument over the summer. I raised my hand. That is how I got connected to the cello. Having attended several Cincinnati Symphony concerts, I had come to love the strings. I was overweight at the time and if I chose violin, I would have to stand up to perform. With cello, I could sit down!

**MH: Tell me about your mentors.**

**RC:** I learned at an early age the importance of a good mentor and teacher. Professor Elizabeth Potteiger, Miami University, offered to teach me free of charge. It was because she saw something in me—she was shocked when I told her I had only been playing a few months. Up until the time I met her, I had thought of becoming a minister, a lawyer, perhaps a teacher—I belonged to Future Teachers of America—the thought of being a university professor had never entered my mind. My parents didn't go to college. When I saw the impact Liz Potteiger had, not only on me, but also her other students, I saw this as a way to minister—in a way—to young people, to help them develop their musical skills. I always say to young people that mentoring must work both ways. The mentor has to see that the mentee is accepting of and grateful for the quality of the interaction. Having had that experience throughout my life, I have been fortunate to have some amazing mentors and teachers. My next teacher was Aldo Parisot. I could tell right away that he would be the kind of teacher that would be an excellent mentor. He taught at Yale until he was 99!

Bryce Jordan was another one. He, being one of the first musicians to be president of a large university, made me eager to get to know him better. Not long after moving to Austin he said to me, "It's obvious to me that you are going to become a university president. Have you thought about where?" He backed this comment up with action and started nominating me for positions. When my first interview was set, he did a mock interview with me. At the end, he asked what I thought of my chances? My reply, "I don't think I'll get the position, but I want to do well enough that the search firm will want to nominate me for other positions." He told me he had interviewed for many positions without success. My jaw literally dropped. I had always thought of him as this incredible person who led a major university. He became a real person to me.

**MH: The third chapter in your book is "The Foundation of Family." Could you talk about your early years and the role your family played?**

**RC:** Because of my upbringing, I have maintained close ties to my family throughout my

career. I have said to the people who work with me, "Your family has to come first. Mine does—they are my life blood."

Neither of my parents graduated. My maternal aunt, a feisty 97 with a mind as sharp as a tack, said my mother was very good in school but got bored. She quit in 10th grade and worked for a family full time. My dad loved school. He did not want to quit but, when he reached 8th grade, his father made him quit—he was the oldest boy. There was a large tobacco farm and my grandfather needed help.

When I was 3, my parents bought a home in Avondale, a suburb of Cincinnati. It was a small, three-bedroom bungalow—very comfortable. We grew up in a household that was highly structured. My father was a true disciplinarian—I didn't always appreciate that as a child. He was also very stern. He butchered the "King's English" with his pronunciations. Mother constantly corrected our grammar, our pronunciation, but she never said, "Don't talk like your father." As a child growing up there were times when I would pray and wish my father was more like my mother. I was embarrassed by him. And, as I told him later on, thank goodness we lived long enough that I realized how fortunate I was to have had him.

**MH: And to have had that discipline!**

**RC:** Absolutely! I really attribute having grown up in that disciplined household to a lot of what I accomplished. I worked hard. Were it not for that, I'm not certain that I would have done all I have. My father had that same sort of fire in his belly to accomplish, to do well. I once asked him what was it about his background that made him that way. His father said to him, "No matter what you do, do it well." He started out as a chipper and eventually became the first black manager at that same company.

I had a brother, Larry, who was 10 months younger than I and a younger brother who was born eight years later. Our lives on Sunday was church all day. Sunday school, the regular morning services, home for a lovely meal—mother was a great cook. Then back to the church for the Baptist Young People's Union and evening service. That was our Sunday. There was no choice. Our social lives consisted of interacting with our relatives of whom there were many. I'm one of 27 grandchildren on my maternal grandmother's side.

There are 40-some on my paternal grandmother's side. And the people we knew at church...

I would say throughout our childhood, education was very important. Also, participation in arts—in the Cincinnati public schools at that time you had the options of going to see the Cincinnati Symphony, the Children's Theatre, the ballet. I was in what is called a gifted class these days. We got to do television shows at the local television station. The symphony, theatre and dance cost extra, but my parents felt they were important, so they paid the extra money.

Both parents felt education was the key for upward mobility. I wanted to go to Oberlin. I had been studying with Professor Potteiger for three years. She got me an Alumni Merit Scholarship, which was a full ride: tuition, room and board. Oberlin Conservatory gave me a scholarship, but it wasn't a full ride. My father said, "If you go to Oberlin, you are going to have to figure out where the other money is coming from." I ended up going to Miami; I won't say reluctantly because Liz Potteiger was fantastic. But, I didn't want to be that close to home!

As it turned out, I got a great education there in the honors program. For three years I had been going to Miami to study cello every Saturday—I'd leave home at 7:30 in the morning and wouldn't get back until almost 5:00. I wasn't with Liz Potteiger all that time. Most of the time was spent in the student center or library. I was also interested in architecture and the head of architecture would allow me to come in and do drawings and stuff. I thought I was comfortable on the campus, thought I really knew the campus.

My freshman year, my first few weeks there, I realized that I felt really alienated from the campus as a black person. It never occurred to me what it would feel like not to have that community, my relatives, my church. Suddenly, here I was, one of two black guys in this residence hall with 254 people. It was shocking to me. So much so that I really didn't know what to do. I didn't talk with anybody.

But I do recall walking down the halls thinking as I passed the other guys, "I'm going to show you how smart I am." It really took me back and I didn't do well first semester.

**MH: Up to that point, you had the security of your family and those you loved around you.**

**RC:** It was that constant affirmation, it never occurred to me.

**MH: You mention in your book that you were a little worried when you first started cello and had to say to your father that you needed a better cello.**

**RC:** That's an important story. When I first started studying with Liz Potteiger, I had the school instrument made out of plywood. She said, "This instrument is not worthy of your talents." I did some investigation and found a violin shop. At the dinner table I told my father that Ms. Potteiger said I needed a better cello, and I found one for \$250. I asked if he would go down to the shop with me. He did and when the owner of the shop explained the instrument, he bought it.

A year later, Professor Potteiger said I needed a better cello, that I had outgrown this one. I didn't have the nerve to ask my father at the dinner table. I wrote him a note that said, "Ms. Potteiger says I've outgrown my cello. Mr. Eichstadt has three German instruments. Please meet me there after the competition." I went to Mr. Eichstadt's and asked if they had seen my father. The answer was no, and I was invited into the back to play the cellos again. There sat my father. Every time I tell this story, I choke up a little because it was years later before I realized how important that was. Not only did he show up, but he said to me, "Choose the one you want." He took out a loan to buy me that instrument.

I took it home and stayed up all night playing. My parents, bless their souls, didn't come and say, "Stop playing that instrument!" They let me play all night.

**MH: When reading your book, it's interesting to see the relationship with your father change.**

**RC:** Yes!

**MH: As you got older...**

**RC:** There was a key moment—1981—when he retired early. They gave the middle managers a buyout that made it worth their while to retire. He and my mother were at our home for Thanksgiving. I was sitting with my dad and he

was telling us about his experience at Milacron and how difficult it had been for him. He talked about how he would push the young black men who came in and try to teach them the ropes of the foundry. There was one man who was frustrated because he couldn't understand what my father was saying to him. The man said, "Just leave me alone, old man." My dad went to the bathroom, closed the door and cried. I couldn't believe it. What he was saying, Martha, was how difficult it was when he had to learn how to do the systems over and how some of the white guys treated him. And I thought, that's the reason he would come home from work and look angry. Of course, as a child, you think it is something wrong with you.

It was his way of apologizing. We all stood up. I don't remember how it happened, but as only Betty Neal Crutcher [Ronald's wife] can do, she looked at my dad and said, "Have you ever really hugged Ron? I know you want to hug him." My father had never hugged me in that way before. And from that point on, every time we were together, we hugged one another.

**MH: That's a very important milestone.**

**RC:** It was critically important. I don't know if she was motivated by the story or his apology. I'm not sure what it was, but I thank God it happened. I began to understand how complex my father was and felt badly about my feelings toward him when I was growing up. How fortunate I was to have been raised in that household.

**MH: When did you first feel the tug toward another path in your career?**

**RC:** It really started just after we adopted Sara—1984. Betty was assistant to the chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, so we were both working. I took a leave of absence from the Greensboro Symphony so that I would have more time in the evening to be with Sara.

I decided I wasn't certain I was going to be happy doing the same things that I had been doing for my career. I didn't know what I was going to do. I was an at-large member of University Senate and had also served on the University Promotion and Tenure Committee. The idea of some sort of administrative position was certainly something I would consider.

Then the provost asked if I would be a part of her team as an associate vice chancellor for

academic affairs for undergraduate instruction and faculty development. I told her "yes," but I would continue to teach my cello students. I wasn't sure I wanted to do administration full time. Big mistake. After starting the work, I realized I really loved the variety, the problem-solving. Every day there was a new problem, and I felt intellectually challenged and invigorated. At the end of the year, I decided I would take the job permanently.

**MH: What types of responsibilities were in your portfolio?**

**RC:** I oversaw the undergraduate curriculum. Any changes that needed to be made came through me. I also worked with the deans and with promotion and tenure issues that came up, particularly problematic ones. I was placed on a committee because I had complained that Greensboro didn't have a faculty development program. This resulted in an Office for Faculty Development. I also oversaw executive searches—a dean or a director of the library—in fact, it was a search for director of the library that made me realize that as much as I loved the job, I couldn't continue to teach cello full time.

**MH: Now I see why you felt you didn't have enough time to give your cello students! That was a huge portfolio.**

**RC:** Yes, it was huge.

After two years I really wanted to be in a music institution. I was applying for positions such as fine arts dean, school of music dean. I got this position as vice president of academic affairs and conservatory dean at the Cleveland Institute of Music. It was a dream job—I could use what I had learned at UNC-Greensboro. CIM was an old-fashioned music conservatory. In fact, my first assignment was to develop the first in-house strategic plan. I put together a steering committee with some members of the Cleveland Orchestra, and we developed a terrific strategic plan. I was invited to the board executive committee to present to them.

Then, Heidi Castleman recommended me for the UT Austin position, and it was one of the best decisions I could have made.

**MH: I realize that we've been talking all this time, even mentioned "the book," but never spoken the title—I Had No Idea You Were Black...Navigating Race on the Road to Leadership.**

**Would you to talk a bit about today—the current political climate? I think there are so many definitions of the word "diverse." What does diverse mean to you?**

**RC:** Before I answer that, if you look at the strategic plan we developed at the University of Richmond, you won't see the word *diversity* in any of the five pillars of that plan. Academic excellence was the first one, the second was access and affordability, third was a thriving and inclusive community. Fourth was something about alumni and fifth was stewardship in a changing world.

People have misused the term often. Diverse has been battered around so much. True diversity means difference—racially, sexually, geographically, ethnically, nationally.

**MH: And in your book you say "embracing diversity in its truest sense: variety."**

**RC:** One of the dilemmas we must face in the United States right now is our incredible polarization. I think in the last four or five years, not only are we polarized, but the people in the discreet bubbles are vilifying people in the other bubbles. Not only are we interacting with only the people who are like us, but we might say, "Those people in that bubble; you can't trust them or we don't like them! We don't want to listen to them."

To me, that is antithetical to a democracy because the lifeblood of the democracy is for people with opposing and competing ideas to interact with each other—thrash out ideas and come to some consensus.

**MH: Your book opens with you meeting a potential donor in Texas. This is after you came to UT Austin. He was leaning toward giving money for string students. When you met this donor, the very first thing he said to you was, "I had no idea you were black."**

**RC:** (heartily laughing!) That's right!

**MH: This was a sucker punch to your gut!**

**RC:** That was my initial response and then I thought back. One of the things my father always taught us—he was so outspoken and

so brash—was if someone says something that knocks you off your feet, take a deep breath and don't respond immediately.

**MH: And that's what you did.**

**RC:** That's what I did, which is good because this man next said, "Perhaps you can help me. My wife and I have been going to Aspen Music Festival for 30 years, and we rarely see any black violinists. Why is that?"

That was my opening, my opportunity. This man loved the same art form I love. I use it as a cautionary tale with my mentees. "How might the man have asked the question in a different way? What might have happened if I had just gotten up and left or gotten upset?" I think it's emblematic of how you should never judge a book by its cover or never take what a person says immediately to you at face value.

**MH: What do you see in your future?**

**RC:** I want to continue working to support some of the initiatives that I have talked about—free expression, dialog across difference, ways for low-income students to get into the best universities. One of the biggest impediments these days is the transfer issue. We should be embarrassed. It is so difficult for students to transfer without losing significant time.

I will continue to play. My trio is no longer playing together—we haven't played for three years. I will play solo programs where I perform for half the program and talk about the book on the other half.

**MH: I want to thank you for the way your book ends—a Georgia O'Keeffe quote:**

***"I have been terrified every day of my life, but that has never stopped me from doing anything that I wanted to do."***

**RC:** I love that. I don't think anyone can be successful unless they have tasted failure.

AMT

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