

Madame la Consul Anne-Laure Desjonqueres, membres du Conseil d'administration de l'Alliance française, enseignants, étudiants, amis, ma famille...

Anne-Laure Desjonqueres, Members of the Board of Directors of the Alliance Française, Teachers, students, friends, my family...

Thank you for taking the time to be present at this ceremony, to celebrate with me this important occasion. I am honored and humbled and am vastly conscious of the privilege it is – that it has been for me – to follow my passion, for la langue and to have others, in this case, the French government, and all of you, recognize this. You are here for various reasons and many of you come from different periods of my life, which I will try to briefly mention here. “Being on the list, on my list, means that you have contributed in some important way to my being here(not this afternoon, per se, no thanks to Atlanta traffic), but in a larger sense, as in, helping me as I served as a the Director of a great cultural organization during one of our Nation’s most trying periods, teaching me French, giving birth to it, . So, yes, in the larger sense, this is one of those occasions for assessment, for recognition, not just of me and this moment, but of the various moments, things, and people, that contributed to helping me get here, today, on this April Fool’s Day, 2026, at thRésidence de France, to be inducted as a Chevalier de l’ordredes Palmes académiques.

(I joked to my staff that I should have had this on Palm Sunday, but ...)

I have been asked a thousand times throughout my lifetime, “Why French?” When did you begin studying French and why did you decide to devote most of your life to studying, teaching, reading, pursuing, the life of the mind, as it were, in the face of,...

Imagine the scene... it’s 1979, little Ricky is living in the environs of Akron, Ohio, we had moved, me, my brother Michael, my two sisters Kristine and

Kimi, my mom, and our step father, Ron, to a big new house in the middle of a five-acre plot of land, nestled between two cornfields,... I had been informed, by the administrators of Norton City Schools, that those of us who wanted to go to college were advised to study a language. There were three options, each associated, already at this age of pre-reason, by cloud of prejudices and rumors floating in the ether pushing us to choose, placing us on one path, or another. These were:

Spanish, which my schoolmates claimed, was easy, which was a mark against it in my book

Latin – a worthy adversary with the disadvantage of having very few native speakers to correspond with

And French, difficult, but slightly more useful than Latin, even though, to my schoolmates, the banks of the Seine probably seemed as unattainable as Julius Caesar's Tiber...

So that was it, as Montaigne say, "Parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était moy."
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The spark that fueled a passion, that led me through the corn fields of Ohio (on my 1979 orange Italvelo) to the Canal Fulton public library to sound the mysteries of this other "language." To quiet corners at Virginia Tech, on the USS Donald B Beary, the Institut Français of Naples, the halls of the Sorbonne and Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, Yale, etc. etc.

I remember an image, a specific photo you can find anywhere or generate using AI, of a medieval castle, in a place that could only be central France, surrounded by piles of freshly cut hay and bathed in a golden light that instilled a sort of mystery and magic that was unusual, to say the least, for a school book (my calculus text certainly had no such images). It was as if this manual for learning French seemed to say, by placing this mystical photo that

was both past and present, distant and yet similar (through its resemblance to the fields of Ohio), that this other world, of castles, baguettes, soft cheeses and romantic contemplation from the stones of Montmartre, was somehow magically linked, could only become whole and meaningful, through the mastery of the French language – it was in these words, their pronunciation, their multitudinous conjurings of ideas and struggle, of tradition and modernity, war and peace, wine and bread, the sacred and the profane, ...

An incantatory power seemed to reside in the mere emission of a word.

This is what propelled me to pursue all these degrees, these experiences, this never-ending obsession for “la langue.”

And, as I was saying, despite the unorthodoxy of my path – a physics major, turned French PhD, an Ohio rock-and-roller Seiziémiste, a Naval officer, constantly pulled, by books, wanderlust, curiosity, “ailleurs” (somewhere else), I have been nurtured, helped, encouraged along the way, so, a logical order of thanks, would be chronological listing of debts, that is who are the people that helped, nurtured, encouraged, provided companionship, and in what way.

beginning my family, who –

my mom, Janet, to whom I owe, not only my existence, but my passion for reading,

my Dad, Earl, an infinity curiosity

my brother and Michael, my best friend and wandering buddy during the first twenty years of my life

My sisters, Kristine and Kimi, who always listened, supported, cheered me on...

My teachers, people who inspired and continue to inspire me, include, not only Dr. Larry Wilburn, my French teacher from George Washington High School in Danville, Virginia, Debbie Losse from Arizona State University,

Claude Blum from the Sorbonne, and Ned Duval, from Yale, but countless colleagues, mentors, passionate writers, Socrates, Montaigne, Proust, Dante Alighieri, well, none of these people could be here today and they send their regrets...

In Naples, where I served at the Military Sealift Command, and
La Sorbonne,...

Arizona

Yale

Teaching,...

Thank you to Dr. Larry Wilburn, who was going to come, but was unable, who taught me French at George Washington High School in Danville, Virginia.

Claude Blum, at the Sorbonne, Deborah N. Losse at Arizona State and

Atlanta, where I have had the fortune of making many new friends, who were, first and foremost, my students, or companions in learning,... many of whom are here and others who could not make it

Cristina, Cullen, Brendano, Luis, Vanessa, whom many of you know, took some classes with me, Kyle, Travis,... and countless others I am in contact with...

As well as students of the Alliance française – thank you Kristina, for your testimony and for the students of AF who are here today (...)

Before I began my formal study of French, I remember reading, I must have twelve or thirteen, two books, “Life on a Medieval Barony, by Williams Stearn Davis,” which I quickly followed up with “Life in Ancient Rome,” that...

Fais ce voudras...

Le voyage

I have been thinking for a while about what it means, for me, to finish up this wonderful project I have had for the past, almost seven years, the meaning of moving, of ending, of leaving, that relate to travel, the intellectual leitmotif and subject of my book... turning the page, turning of a leaf, beginning a new project – a betrayal – where does this need to write, to live in a place like Lucca, come from,

The past is never past...

When I travel, I don't know what I am looking for, but I do what I am fleeing from...

But why mention all this? Aren't we here to celebrate me? My having been recognized for this prestigious award? So why shouldn't Richard simply thank everyone for being here and accept his prize?