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TUSKEGEE, Ala. — The Tuskegee University community honored the life and legacy of its most renowned professor, George Washington Carver. After a procession of faculty and staff in academic regalia, the 14th Annual George Washington Carver Convocation was held today in the University Chapel.

This year's keynote speaker was James R. Talton, the director of the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System in Montgomery, Ala. In his introductory remarks, Tuskegee University President Gilbert L. Rochon, shared details about Tuskegee's unique relationship with veterans' medical care in Alabama.

"It was the second president of Tuskegee University Robert Russa Moton who allocated 300 acres of the campus of Tuskegee University to establish a VA hospital that is now adjacent to the campus," Rochon said "Primarily to serve the needs of black soldiers and to be staffed by black doctors and nurses, something that was unheard of."

In a passionate address, Talton warned the audiences of the danger of becoming irrelevant in American society. Using a biblical story about a king in Exodus 1:8, Talton laid a basis for the importance of remaining an important part of society.

The enemy within

He said a people's relevancy in America is judged by a virtual balance sheet of contributions to society and deductions of resources. He said a lack of contributions and draining resources makes a people irrelevant, despite individual achievements.

Talton said the disparities in education and criminal behavior found in black communities are contributing to harmful misrepresentations. Also, he said that misperceptions and disdain among blacks are contributing to the decline of society and impeding the achievement of equality.

"The real enemy of a man is that part that keeps bringing yesterday's garbage to today's dinner table and feeds on it. And he grows ill from eating rotten food," he said.

Talton urged the audience not to look at his fiery address as a damning criticism, but as a diagnosis. He concluded his speech by calling the internal and external problems that blacks face a “disease for which you and I are definitely the prescription.”

Talton is board certified in health care management and is a fellow of the American College of Healthcare Executives. He is also a certified physician assistant. He received the Department of Veterans Affairs “Secretary’s Award” for his leadership following the devastating tornado in Tuscaloosa, Ala., on April 27, 2011.

He is also a recipient of the 2011 Alabama Hospital Association Hospital Heroes Award for his leadership at Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center. After his address, Rochon presented him with the Robert Russa Moton Award for Exemplary Leadership in Health Systems Management.