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THE EDUCATION OF A LIFETIME by Robert Khayat

“Robert Khayat’s extraordinary life has had more rough patches than most observers would believe. In this engaging memoir, he provides an unflinching look at the challenges, the adversity, and the ups and downs of a career that ultimately transformed a great American university.”

—John Grisham

As a young boy growing up in a segregated Mississippi, Robert Khayat never could have imagined the strength and courage he would need, as chancellor of the University of Mississippi, to overcome his greatest adversary: tradition.

In 1962, while a riot was in full swing on the University of Mississippi’s campus over the admission of James Meredith, the university’s first black student, Khayat was experiencing a different kind of integration. He was a member of the newly integrated Washington Redskins. The black players were welcomed with open arms as Khayat and his friend, and black teammate, Bobby Mitchell, watched the riot that was taking place at Ole Miss. Khayat had no way of knowing, 35 years later, he would be leading the same university through one of its greatest challenges — its disassociation from the Confederate flag and the university’s past.

In his forthcoming memoir, *The Education of a Lifetime* (Nautilus Publishing; September 10, 2013; \$24.95; ISBN: 978-1-936-946-17-4), Khayat writes about his childhood days in Moss Point, Mississippi, the state’s segregationist policies that prevented his SEC championship baseball team from playing in the College World Series, and the sadness of experiencing his father’s arrest and guilty plea. These seemingly disparate events worked to prepare him to battle the vestiges of racial strife that continued to haunt the university’s culture as he accepted the honor of becoming the university’s 15th chancellor.

In 1996, after a particularly dismal football season, Khayat went to the field house to visit the coaches. The mood was somber. He asked coach Tommy Tuberville why they were so depressed. Tuberville replied, “We can’t recruit against the Confederate flag.” Khayat then ordered an image review from the public relations firm Burson-Marsteller. The results were devastating but clear: among the symbols, songs, mascots and names, the flag was, by far, the most damaging. The university, according to the survey, had no public perception except to be seen as a racist institution.

The image review caught the attention of the *New York Times*. They ran a full-page story covering Khayat's attempt to distance the university from the symbols of the Old South. In the ensuing months, he found himself in the cross-hairs of the Ku Klux Klan, the Heritage Defense Committee, and a group that called themselves the Confederate States of America.

As Khayat and his team worked to improve the academic standards of the school, renovate a dilapidated campus, and increase faculty salaries, they were overwhelmed by the letters, phone calls, and faxes from those who wanted to maintain the old symbols. And though there were many alumni who supported his efforts, the damning letters — and even death threats — came from groups and individuals across the nation.

While he struggled to maintain balance during this chaotic period, he often thought of his father. “The similarities between the life of the father I loved and the history of the university I loved were not lost on me,” he writes. His father, who did remarkable things for Mississippi, was steeped in the old ways of doing business. His father's inability to change with the times resulted in indictments and, ultimately, a conviction. A man who spent his life helping others ended on a devastating note. Khayat could not stand by and let his alma mater suffer the same fate. However, one major obstacle stood between his desire to move forward and the hurdles of old symbols — the First Amendment. Oxford's most famous native son, William Faulkner, wrote in *Requiem for a Nun*, “The past is never dead. It's not even past.” The past was Khayat's new adversary, and it was going to stare him down every day of his chancellorship.

“I have come to believe that many external forces shape and mold us. I am no exception,” Khayat writes. “Frequently, there is no way to prepare for a particular challenge or situation and you have to go with what you have and who you are. And who you are is often determined by your family.” He knew that perception was a critical component of any forward movement for the university. And that perception included not only “how we were perceived by others but how we perceived ourselves.”

Ultimately, in a stroke of genius, the leadership team at the university found a solution to the flag: they banned sticks from all sporting events. The ban — which included sticks for flags, sticks for umbrellas, and sticks for corndogs — led to a complete shift in the atmosphere at the university's sporting events. “Given the chance, and with a great team, I believed we could change this culture. Together, I was certain, we could become a great university again.”

By the time Khayat retired, the University of Mississippi had been awarded a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa; a nationally ranked honor's college had been established; a groundbreaking institute for racial reconciliation was launched; a permanent leadership institute was built, and a top international studies program was created. Enrollment increased 70 percent, and the university's budget grew from \$500 million to \$1.5 billion. And, in a crowning achievement, Ole Miss hosted the very first presidential debate where a minority candidate took the stage.

Khayat's story gives readers a behind-the-scenes look at how a university moved from mediocrity to excellence. We relive, along with Khayat, the courting of an eccentric donor, as well as private conversations with a sitting U.S. President, governors, coaches and celebrities. We also see how a man worked to make amends for past mistakes. *The Education of a Lifetime* is a funny, touching and insightful memoir. And it is proof that one man — a man dedicated to respecting the dignity of every individual — can make lasting change

More Praise for *The Education of a Lifetime*

“From the playing fields of the NFL to the groves of academe, where he broke the shackles of the Old South at his alma mater, Robert Khayat has led a remarkable life, and his memoir is full of wonderful anecdotes and wisdom. As an ancient scholar said of Aesop and his fables, ‘He makes use of humble incidents to teach great truths.’”

Curtis Wilkie, author of *The Fall of the House of Zeus*

“Robert Khayat needs no introduction as both an educator and an indomitable torchbearer for a better Mississippi. The grand surprise of *The Education of a Lifetime* is Dr. Khayat’s storytelling. Having clearly absorbed the state’s rich narrative tradition, Dr. Khayat quilts an array of magnificently-told stories—about watching a bad movie with Elvis to kicking a 50-yard field goal against the New York Giants to painfully exorcising the malign remnants of Ole Miss’s history—into a remarkable, candid, and deeply inspiring memoir.”

Jonathan Miles, author of *Dear American Airlines* and *Want Not*

“Maybe once or twice in a thousand years, fate places a person who will do the right thing in the right place at the right time. Robert Khayat left the nest of quiet bayous and coastal rhythms to tackle life, learning and the law. His toughest adversary along the way: tradition. Armed with a cowboy hero’s fortitude and a certain guileless charm, Robert managed to kick one through the uprights for his oft-maligned Mississippi.”

Rheta Grimsley Johnson

Author of *Hank Hung the Moon* and *Warmed Our Cold, Cold Hearts*

“It’s not just that *The Education of a Lifetime* should be required reading for all University of Mississippi students and alumni and friends. It’s that it should be read for all who feel called to be leaders, and by all who have been led. By all who’ve dedicated their lives to improving their communities, and by all who’ve had moments of struggle and doubt while doing so. By all who love the South, and by all who can’t conceive of such love. In short, this is a book for everyone. Here we have episodes from a long and challenging career—the charming of an eccentric donor; the attempt to separate Ole Miss from the racially charged symbol of the Confederate flag, which resulted in death threats for Robert Khayat and his family; the hosting of the Presidential debate, in an effort to show the world the university’s progress. With candor and humor, Robert Khayat tells the stories behind the stories that have made him a respected leader and an inspiration to so many.”

Tom Franklin & Beth Ann Fennelly, co-authors of *The Tilted World*

“Charismatic, energetic, visionary, Robert Khayat inherited in 1995 an underfunded and dwindling state university haunted by Mississippi’s racist history. Over the dozen years under his leadership, the university transformed itself into a thriving public institution committed to academic excellence and proud of being chosen to host the first Presidential debate between John McCain and Barack Obama. In this memoir, *The Education of a Lifetime*, the beloved former Chancellor tells us how. I have taught at the University of Mississippi for twenty-five years, and I’m moved to read the history of its extraordinary changes.”

Ann Fisher-Wirth, Award-winning poet

"Robert Khayat has written a delightful, insightful account of who he is and why. Joyous reading. A real winner!"

Perian Conerly, author of *Backseat Quarterback*

“I left Mississippi over fifty years ago to make movies in Hollywood. I made a few. Robert, my dear friend and chancellor, has written a book that has made me wish I had stayed home. If I had, I might’ve accomplished half as much as he has. A must-read for all.”

Larry Gordon, Producer of *Field of Dreams* and *Die Hard*

“When the College Board asked Robert Khayat to articulate his vision for The University of Mississippi, he said he wanted to make Ole Miss one of America’s great public universities. *The Education of a Lifetime* provides ample evidence that he achieved his goal.”

Historian David Sansing