Hello, my name is Derek Weiss. I am a biology and environmental studies major, graduating this year and a student representative on the HWS Campus Tree Advisory Committee.

I made my first visit to this campus on a warm and sunny summer day in June during my college search as a senior in high school. It was on that day that I began to value and appreciate the beauty of this campus. The brilliant colors and smells of the blossoming trees created a very welcoming environment, and I knew this was the place for me.

I’ve come to learn during my time here, through my classes, extra curriculars, and various opportunities, that the same natural beauty and welcoming feeling that drew me here had drawn a host of inspired educators, brilliant faculty, talented students, and passionate staff.

As a student, it is all too easy to become entrenched in the academic work and lifestyle of a college campus; streams of students rush to classes, the dining hall, the library, or the Fieldhouse, often consumed by the classwork looming over our heads and driven by a schedule or routine.

We fall into a rhythm, repeating our class schedule week after week, grinding away at our coursework, staying focused on school, striving to excel, and remain committed to the task at hand, but it can become overwhelming for many of us. We are sometimes so focused that we come to ignore the environment around us, and miss the opportunity to reflect among the natural beauty.

Sometimes it seems like every hour of our day is filled with classes, meals, meetings, sports practices, and work, but I urge you to find some time in your day, even if its just on your commute between commitments, to slow down, remove yourself from the routine, and make time to reflect on your life.

For me, this process of reflection is greatly enhanced by experiencing it within a natural setting. Being in the presence of the beauty of our Mother Earth invokes an understanding of the larger context of life. While I frequently make my way off campus to spend some time with the natural wonders of the world, even within the disciplined college lifestyle, we are graced with opportunities and places to find sources of natural reflection right here, in our backyard, and yet another is growing on this very hill, as we plant these 70 trees today.

As a community, we’re fortunate to live in a place that has all the conveniences of modern life, yet still retains the beauty of the natural world. The sunken gardens on the Arts campus, the trees and benches along the side of the lake, the willows by Odells pond, and the various trees lining pathways, quads, and today this historic Hill, provide a gorgeous natural setting in which to reflect on how we live, learn, and grow.

William Smith was a nurseryman, through and through, and the evidence of this persists to this day on our campus. Our expansive mature trees are in large part thanks to him. Today we continue to be committed to this
heritage of trees, and uphold a strong tradition of being stewards of our urban forest, making this campus community our own natural wonder. Thanks to the dedicated work of our Buildings and Grounds crew, faculty and staff, and especially today the Arbor Day Foundation, we are able to keep moving forward in the efforts of making this campus extraordinary.

So I urge you, as you carry out your daily routine, however full it may be, to slow your pace, be grateful of the natural beauty of our campus, and reflect on your life in the presence of these trees.