When President Walter Harrison concluded his inauguration message in 1999, he quoted the artist Prince’s hit song, “1999,” saying “now let’s party like it’s 1999.” Nineteen years later, it was party time again in the Chase Family Arena of the Sports Center as more than 600 people gathered on April 5 to celebrate Harrison’s “Legacy of Leadership.”

Everything about the party, from the food to the music to the mementos, reflected Harrison’s influence. The food station at the east end of the expansive room offered up pierogi and kielbasa with sauerkraut and onions, in honor of Harrison’s Pittsburgh roots. Another station served students’ menu favorites, sliders and macaroni and cheese because students were the focus of Harrison’s tenure. On the walk between the two stations, guests could consume popcorn and Cape Cod Creamery ice cream in deference to Harrison’s penchant for the Cape where he spends weekends and vacations as often as possible. The ice cream flavors included espresso with chocolate-covered espresso beans as Harrison is a known fan of caffeine.
The University pep band, under the energetic direction of Christine Gee, kept the arena’s vibes lively as the guests arrived. That was fitting since, with help from The Hartt School, Harrison introduced the pep band as well as a fight song and an alma mater to campus. Some of the students in the pep band decorated their horns with Harrison’s photo.

Near the arena entrance was a high-tech Viral Photo Booth where guests could don hats and/or boas and record personal messages for Harrison or simply have photos taken to send him a message. The booth was manned by its owner Steve Henn ’02, an entrepreneur and police officer in western Massachusetts. Among those who recorded at the booth were Annmarie and Robert Davis who teach theatre in The Hartt School. They recalled casting Harrison in two campus theatre productions, Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Nicholas Nickleby*, based on Charles Dickens’s novel.

Praise and gratitude for what Harrison did for the University was on everyone’s lips. Many also noted the appropriateness of the venue since Harrison is an unfailing supporter of all University athletics. He had a nearly 100 percent presence courtside at Hawks basketball games where he was often the halftime radio interviewee and showed an abiding fascination with and appreciation for game strategy.
University Board of Regents Chair Lucille Nickerson assumed the role of MC on the colorfully decorated stage. Joining her on stage was a representative from each of the University’s key constituencies: Dominic Fulco ’81, vice chair of the board of regents, Carolyn Bligh ’92, president of the Alumni Association, Ben Ide, chair of the staff association, Ann Pidano, chair of the faculty senate, and Julia Piri ’17, president of the student government association.

Harrison and his wife Dianne entered the room to a fanfare played by a Hartt School brass ensemble. She joined other guests at a table in front of the stage and Harrison took a seat on the stage. Nickerson introduced a short video tribute to Harrison and his accomplishments that played on the jumbotrons on either end of the arena. (View the video at hartford.edu/tribute.) In it many members of the University community express deep, heartfelt, and in some cases, emotional thanks to the man who encouraged everyone to call him Walt, stopped to talk to anyone who wanted to say something as he walked across campus, and who maintained an open-door policy in his office.

Nickerson then provided an overview of Harrison’s accomplishments before inviting Regent Tom Trillo ’79 to the stage for a special presentation. Trillo focused his remarks on Harrison’s leadership around athletics, noting that he is recognized nationally as an advocate for student athletes receiving a degree, he is a baseball scholar and aficionado, and he is an avid fan of the University’s athletic teams and programs. Trillo referred to the University’s last 19 years as a “championship season” and invited the crowd to watch as a championship banner that will hang in the arena in Harrison’s honor was unveiled as the pep band played the University fight song.
The banner unveiling was followed by the presentation of proclamations from Connecticut’s Governor, the Connecticut General Assembly, and a video message from U.S. Congressman John Larson who also read his tribute to Harrison into the Congressional Record.

Early in Harrison’s tenure he asked then professor of music composition Stephen Michael Gryc to compose an alma mater and a fight song for the University. For the party, Gryc composed an original fanfare that incorporates the complete alma mater. It was performed by the Hartt brass ensemble under the direction of Maestro Edward Cumming.

After the party, Gryc reflected on the importance Harrison placed on “enriching the culture of the University,” specifically by asking for an alma mater and a fight song. “I jumped right on it,” said Gryc, “there are not many composers who have the opportunity to have that kind of lasting impact on a university.”

Harrison was joyful and smiling throughout the presentations but the final presentation prompted a full-on guffaw. As a boy growing up in Pittsburgh he wanted to be a Pirates shortstop when he grew up. That did not happen but Nickerson read a letter from Pittsburgh Pirates President Frank Coonelly who said, “We are very proud and humbled to know that you have remained loyal to the Pirates. Congratulations from your hometown and your hometown ball club!” Then Nickerson presented him with an authentic Pirates jersey with “Harrison” and the number 19 on the back.
When he came to the podium, Harrison thanked his wife Dianne, a scholar of 19th-century Victorian literature, for “giving up her hopes and dreams in life, so I could fulfill mine.” He pledged to let her determine the course of their remaining years together.

Harrison referred to his nearly two decades as president of the University as “the most fulfilling and the most joyous years of my life.”

As is characteristic, Harrison shared the credit for the many ways the University has grown and excelled, such as doubling the endowment, increasing the number of under-represented students by 300 percent, and building or renovating more than a dozen buildings. “We’ve done all this together. These are not things I would ever have been able to accomplish without this wonderful community,” he said.
While acknowledging the unveiled banner, he spotted in the crowd former women's basketball coach and women's Basketball Hall of Famer Jennifer Rizzotti who coached the Hartford Hawks to four America East Conference championships and four trips to the NCAA tournament. Harrison said her achievements are recognized with eight banners hanging from the rafters in the Chase Arena. “So I deserve one-ninth of that space and I’ll take that,” said Harrison. “When you are the president of a university you learn that your greatest job is to enable other people to do what they do.”

After the party, Rizzotti commented that Harrison “always asked what I needed to be successful,” and his “sense of loyalty made me feel special.”

Looking out at the arena from the stage set up along one side, Harrison recalled another time he saw the arena in that configuration, a visit to campus by President Barack Obama in 2013. He added that President Bill Clinton also came to campus soon after he left office. Bringing such notable people to campus was an achievement, but “I didn’t do that, we all did it,” said Harrison. “My 19 years at the helm of the University of Hartford have taught me the definition of community.”

This time Harrison’s closing line wasn’t from a popular rock song but rather was an ode to UHart. “This is a wonderful University. It is better than it is usually recognized for being and better than most of us think it is. I want you leaving here today not thinking, ‘Well, Walt Harrison was a great guy,’ but that he had the great privilege and honor of being president of the greatest University in the world.”