

Office of the President  
June 17, 2022

Members, Board of Trustees:

## HONORARY DEGREE RECIPIENT

Recommendation: that the Board of Trustees approve awarding an Honorary Doctor of Humane Letters to Ms. Virginia Bell, as approved and recommended by the University Faculty.

Background: Pursuant to the Conditions of Merit for Honorary Degrees, the University Joint Committee on Honorary Degrees recommended to the elected Faculty Senators that the specified honorary degree be awarded to Virginia Bell. The elected Faculty Senators have approved the recommendation.

A biographical sketch of the recipient is attached.

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Action taken:  Approved     Disapproved     Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Virginia Bell

Born in Harrison County, Kentucky in 1922, Virginia Bell was raised on a subsistence farm as the second of seven children. She earned a bachelor's degree in math and biology at Transylvania University in 1944.

Bell and her husband moved to Nashville, Tennessee where they reared five children. The family returned to Lexington in 1974 when her husband accepted the presidency of the Lexington Theological Seminary. At that same time, Bell's parents, still living on the farm outside of Cynthiana, started experiencing the challenges of aging, allowing Bell to witness firsthand how care was provided for older adults. These experiences, plus earlier life exposures to how persons with dementia were being shuttered in psychiatric units, ignited her commitment to do something more for aging adults, particularly those with dementia and their families.

At age 60, Bell earned a Master of Social Work at UK, began her second career at UK's Sanders-Brown Center on Aging and created the Best Friends Approach to dementia care, a model adopted by care facilities, nursing homes and day treatment centers around the world. While acknowledging the medical and psychological challenges of dementia, the Best Friends Approach emphasizes and respects the humanity of people with dementia and focuses on relationship-centered care. Understanding that each person has a life history, identity and talents, the Best Friends Approach embraces the very human need for connection through interpersonal interaction, activity, dignity and respect.

Bell and her colleagues, particularly David Troxel, have disseminated information about the Best Friends Approach in books (*The Best Friends Approach to Alzheimer's Care*, 1996; *A Dignified Life*, 2002, 2012, now in its third edition) and numerous national and international conferences. The approach, and Bell herself, have received numerous honors, grants and awards, including recognition by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Council on Aging, and the American Society on Aging. Bell twice has served on the Kentucky Governor's Task Force on Alzheimer's Disease; she received UK's Sullivan Award in 2004; she was inducted into the UK Social Work Hall of Fame (2010), and she received the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni Award (2010).

In 1992, in acknowledgment of her groundbreaking achievements in improving the lives of older adults and their loved ones, Transylvania University awarded Bell an honorary doctorate. While she officially retired in 1993, Bell remains a constant mentor to the Best Friends program, conducting training for volunteers, attending activities at day centers, traveling throughout the world to help establish new programs and serving as a keynote speaker at national and international conferences. Around the time of her 100th birthday in June 2022, Bell will be addressing a global meeting on Alzheimer's disease, continuing her efforts to recognize that beneath the challenges of dementia lies a person of value with a past, present and future.

Virginia Bell is recommended for an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from the University of Kentucky.