

tales of a TAFTIE

BY BILL GLOVIN

Mason W Gross, Class of 1929

UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT AND "ANSWER MAN"

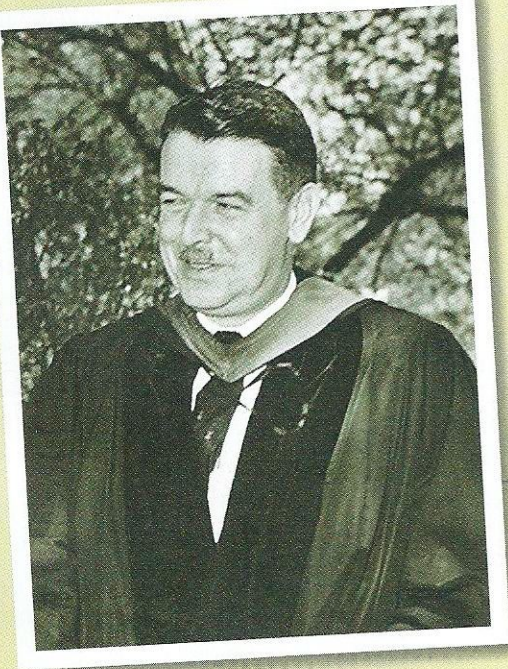


PHOTO: Mason Gross '29 sworn in as 16th president of Rutgers University in 1959.

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Few Rutgers students realize that the university's Mason Gross School of the Arts is named for a former university president. They would also be surprised to learn that during Gross's rise through the 1950s to become president, he was known to millions of new television viewers as "answer man" on two popular television quiz shows) *Think Fast* and *Two for the Money*.

During his presidency (from 1959 to 1971) Rutgers was transformed. Enrollment rose from 18,000 to 30,000, the budget grew from \$18 million to \$68 million and an enormous construction program took place. Gross led the university in its adjustment to its new role as the State University of New Jersey and, in the late 1960s, kept the campuses in Newark, New Brunswick and Camden from imploding.

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1911, Gross entered Taft in 1925. At the time, most of his schoolmates were from Republican families, but the Grosses were Democrats (as was classmate Wagner, who went on to become mayor of NYC), and Mason had spirited debates with them.

While his father, grandfather and brother attended Yale, he bucked family tradition and opted to spend his undergraduate years at Cambridge, U.K., where he studied the classics and was a member of the rowing team. After moving back to the U.S. and receiving his doctorate at Harvard in 1938, he became a philosophy instructor at Columbia University. In New York he met and married Julia Kernan, a Vassar graduate, and eventually they had four children.

With war looming, he enlisted in the Army Intelligence Corps in 1942 and was later assigned to a bomber group in Brindisi, Italy, where he became acting chief intelligence officer. In 1945, he returned to the States with a Bronze Star and the rank of captain.

He moved to Rutgers in 1946 to become assistant professor of philosophy and assistant to the dean of

Rutgers College in New Brunswick. In each of his 25 years there, he taught at least one class in philosophy; he also wrote every one of the more than 300 speeches he gave as university president.

Despite leading Rutgers at a time when it was bursting at the seams, he is more remembered as a champion for free speech and for leading the university through the turbulence of the late 1960s, when the Vietnam War, political assassinations, gender and racial discrimination often led to violence on college campuses throughout the country.

In 1965, when respected history professor Eugene Genovese announced at a teach-in that he would welcome the impending victory of North Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh, Gross refused to dismiss Genovese under intense state and federal political pressure. His stand led to the Meiklejohn Award in 1966 by the Association of University Professors (AAU), given for the defense of academic freedom.

His legacy was such that in his last years at Rutgers, he was greeted by a standing ovation from students, faculty and New Jerseyites whenever he spoke at a gathering. Perhaps his most impressive ovation came from a group of angry student protestors who surrounded and occupied his office in the central administration building on May 4, 1970.

Recalling the incident at a 1991 ceremony to unveil his class's gift (the Mason Gross Memorial on Voorhees Mall), Owen Ullmann, deputy managing editor of *USA Today* at the time, said: "Mason told us we were his guests and to make ourselves at home; that this was our university as well as his, and asked us not to break anything. As he walked away, we applauded, and we respected his wishes." •

-Bill Glavin

Bill Glavin is senior editor at *Rutgers Magazine*.