helton “Spike” Lee ’79, founder and president of 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks and Musicworks, is known for the hard-hitting messages of his award-winning films. But finding his voice—indeed, finding his passion in life—was a frustrating journey that had him, as a student, concerned about his future.

Lee, the Founder’s Week Convocation speaker, said he spent his first two years at Morehouse taking electives because he could not settle on a major.

He dreaded the thought of graduation day, knowing that his classmates were already preparing for medical and law schools or Wall Street jobs. Although it wasn’t until his junior year that he declared a major, Lee said he was able to eventually find his passion because his parents allowed him to follow his heart.

“Don’t succumb to parental pressure that start you on a path where you’ll be unhappy down the road,” he warned the men of Morehouse. “You don’t want to be 20 years from now in a job you don’t like. Do what you love—not what’s going to make you money.”

Lee’s words were easily echoed in Reflections of Excellence, where the panelists—the eight Bennie and Candle Award recipients—spoke about being mavericks who are willing to fight for right while making turning passion into one’s life work. Reflections, the Saturday-morning preamble to the highly anticipated “A Candle in the Dark” Gala, has proven to be the best opportunity to hear the Gala honorees talk about their experiences and the secrets to their success and answer questions from the floor.

Perhaps one of the most poignant questions was from a young man who asked all the honorees: “At the end of the day, when its all done with, what do you want to be remembered by?” On a distinguished panel of successful businessmen (James O. Webb ’53, Berry Gordy, Herman J. Russell Sr. and Reginald Davis ’84), successful physicians (Gerald Truesdale ’71 and Charles J. McDonald) and esteemed civil servants (Richard O. Hope ’61 and Charles J. Ogletree), noticeably absent was a mention of wealth or material gain, prominence or the pursuit of titles. Though their words were different, the sentiment from each was the same, and could be best summed up with Gordy’s succinct, one-word response: “relationships.”

In a nod to the previous night’s concert, featuring husband-wife duo Kenny Lattimore and Chante Moore, it was almost appropriate that they touch on the importance of building healthy connections with others. As many of the honorees noted, true achievement is measured in how people serve their communities, how they love their spouses and the intangible gifts they leave to the next generation.
The Founder’s Week Concert offered a little something for everybody as the couple serenaded the crowd with R&B favorites such as “You’re All I Need to Get By” and “Is It Still Good to You?” The Valentine’s-week concert drew couples celebrating their love, as evidenced by handholding and a few lingering smooches.

But it was “A Candle in the Dark” Gala, long held as the centerpiece to Founder’s Week, which brought the meaning of fulfilling one’s destiny into perspective. The honorees came to the podium to share a few minutes’ worth of wisdom with the 1,500-plus crowd.

For Webb, the award was a testament to the power of a half-century-long partnership. He and his wife, Frankie, who died last year, would have celebrated their 51st wedding anniversary. They were partners in just about everything, he said. Webb accepted the award in her name.

Hope credited former President Benjamin E. Mays with teaching him valuable lessons. He played in the band that traveled with Mays from place to place. While they were on trips, Mays would “turn around and talk to us about his experiences and his life,” said Hope.

Davis thanked the women in his life: his wife and daughter. “No one achieves anything alone,” he said, “It’s more important to be an exceptional parent than an exceptional executive.” Truesdale thanked his parents, while Ogletree announced where he has set his sights for one his next justice projects: “I’m going to take this Candle and use it...With this candle I hope to put some light in the dark places of America, places like Tulsa, Okla.” Ogletree was referring to the Greenwood community, a wealthy black enclave of about 15,000 residents that was destroyed by the Ku Klux Klan in 1921.

It was also a night for introspection. Russell, a self-described “poor kid from Summerhill,” found irony in the fact that he had input into shaping the city where he was once raised. His eponymous construction company is responsible for many of the buildings that dot the Atlanta skyline. The soft-spoken McDonald closed his speech with praise for the College. “I really want to congratulate Morehouse on repopulating the earth with a dying breed: the educated black man.” And Gordy capped the night’s sentiments with a quote that he said has been his verbal signature for a lifetime: “Don’t curse the darkness, light a candle

Sunday’s worship service, led by the Rev. Dr. Albert Paul Brinson ’61, re-examined the importance of valuing everyone’s stories using the parables that Jesus taught his followers. Brinson’s portrait was also unveiled and hung in the Hall of Honor.

“As usual, [Founder’s Week] was among highlights in the life of the College,” said Brinson. “It helped to see the impact that Morehouse has had on the community and the world.”