

# Kristeligt Dagblad

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## She will speak at the Rebildfest: Our freedom is more important than ever

The American lawyer and university leader Rachelle Keck has Danish roots and has been asked to speak in Rebild at the Danish marking of the USA's independence day.



**Philip Christoffersen**

Journalist



American Rachelle Keck has been selected to speak at Rebildfesten 2024. The 55-year-old president of Grand View University in Iowa, which was founded by Danes, herself has roots from immigrants from Denmark. . Photo: Grant View University.

**I**t is not more than a year and a half ago that Rachelle Keck found out that she is about 50 percent genetically Danish.

Following the fact that the 55-year-old lawyer became president of the university Grand View, which was also founded by Danes and is located in Des Moines in the state of Iowa, she also became interested in her ancestry. Therefore, she was the first in her family to investigate where the family actually came from.

Had she known better, she might have put two and two together and derived the Danish connection from her very Danish-sounding surname "Karstens".

"I knew I had something Scandinavian in my roots, but now I know that my ancestors on both my mother's and my father's side of the family arrived in the United States as immigrants from Denmark in the mid-1800s," says Rachelle Keck, who has traced his family to both Silkeborg and Aalborg:

"Karstens is my maiden name. And I found that back from around the 16th century. There was a woman called Karstensdatter."

Rachelle "Karstens" Keck is in Denmark this week because she has been invited to speak at the annual Rebildfest in Rebild Bakker south of Aalborg. Rebildfesten aims to be the largest celebration of the 4th of July outside the United States.

But even if the American Independence Day is in every way a local and not a global day of celebration, the importance of celebrating freedom and independence is important across the Atlantic, Rachelle Keck believes.

"The 4th of July is first and foremost about freedom. About what freedom means to us as individuals and to us as nations. But also what it means to our friendship across countries. I know that Denmark has been occupied and therefore has a slightly different history than the United States when it comes to the meaning of independence and freedom. But both countries have experienced challenges in the form of other cultures and countries that have wanted to take over and rule over us," she says.

"So in this ever more fragile world, with a tense geopolitical situation, our freedom is more important than ever."

Grand View University, where Rachelle Keck is president, is the only university in the United States founded by Danes. In 1896, the same year that Kristeligt Dagblad was founded, Danish immigrants who were inspired by the poet-priest Grundtvig established the theological-Lutheran university in the Midwest.

That the university today stands by its Danish roots is clear when you arrive on *campus*, explains Rachelle Keck.

The Danish and American flags hang side by side. One of the buildings has been named the "Happiness Center", while the dining room is called the "Valhalla Room". Other buildings are named after former students, whose names were Rasmussen and Jensen.

The connection between the USA and Denmark is important to insist on staying the same, Rachelle Keck believes. And it is also something she will touch on in her speech on July 4. Both the past, the present and the future, Grand View's history and her own.

"We are moving forward into a constantly expanding global society, where the world is getting smaller and smaller due to technology, communication and the ability to travel. Global curiosity is one of the values we want to cultivate among the students at Grand View, and we are constantly interested in finding out how we can strengthen the connection between the school and the Danish students who want to come here," she says.

In a broader perspective, the war in Ukraine has also highlighted the importance of nurturing the connection between Europe and the US, continues Rachelle Keck.

"The more we do to strengthen our friendships across the world, the stronger our countries become. Denmark and the USA have one of the longest unbroken diplomatic relations in the world. And that means something. And you can see that at, for example, the Rebildfesten."

2024 will be a year when the eyes of the world will once again be directed towards the United States. In November, Americans will have to choose between the incumbent and aging President Joe Biden and the unruly, now convicted criminal, former President Donald Trump.

Rachelle Keck believes that the election this year has emphasized the necessity of what she calls an "enlightened citizenry". An idea which was also embedded in the thinking of the founder of the high school movement, Grundtvig, who wanted an enlightened people.

"I look at every presidential election through an educational lens, and this year really emphasizes how important it is to educate the public. I'm a registered independent myself, and I don't subscribe to the views of any one political party. I don't like labels, and I think I'm competent enough to figure out what I mean, thank you very much! And I try to pass that idea on to our students, that they are educated, that they are smart and able to find out for themselves what they think about the candidates and the issues we face," says Rachelle Keck.

She has taken her husband with her to Denmark, while the couple's four adult children are at home in the USA. The Rebildfest takes place on 4 July, and this year you can also hear the Danish astronaut Andreas Mogensen among the speakers.

The party is organized by the Rebildselskabet, the first Danish-American friendship association, which was founded in 1912.

## RACHEL KECK

Born 1969 into a family of nine children.

PhD in law from Drake University in the state of Iowa.

Since 2022, president of the Danish-founded university Grand View, which is also located in Iowa.

Is married and has four children.

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