

# Lech Wałęsa, former President of Poland, to present Varner Vitality lecture



Former President of Poland and Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Wałęsa will speak at Oakland University on November 15.

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Lech Wałęsa, the former President of Poland, will be this year's Varner Vitality Lecture keynote speaker. He will speak about the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, his country's struggles against Communism and also take questions from the audience through moderator Carol Cain, columnist for the Detroit Free Press and host of CBS-TV62's television program *Michigan Matters*.

The Friday, Nov. 15 program will begin at 7 p.m. in Oakland University Founders Ballrooms A and B. [Register to attend here.](#)

[Click here to submit a question](#) for the discussion.

“Bringing in Lech Wałęsa to campus continues a strong tradition of great Varner Vitality Series speakers,” said Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost James Lentini. “His perspective on the fall of the Berlin Wall, and sharing stories of his personal struggles, should remind us all of the freedoms and liberties we sometimes take for granted in our country.”

Wałęsa, born in 1943, is a Polish electrician turned politician, trade-union organizer, philanthropist and human-rights activist. A charismatic leader, he co-founded Solidarity (Solidarność), the Soviet bloc’s first independent trade union, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, and served as President of Poland from 1990 to 1995.

Wałęsa came to the world’s attention in 1980 during the infamous Lenin Shipyard strike in Gdansk, Poland. Workers, incensed by an increase in prices set by the Communist government, were demanding the right to organize free and independent trade unions. Those strikes significantly improved workers’ rights. In September 1981, he was elected Solidarity Chairman at the First National Solidarity Congress in Gdansk.

For those efforts, he was named “Man of the Year” by *Time* magazine as well as publications like *The Financial Times*, *The London Observer*, *Die Welt*, *Die Zeit*, *L’Express* and *LeSoir*.

The country’s brief enjoyment of relative freedom ended in December 1981, when the government imposed martial law, “suspended” Solidarity, arrested many of its leaders, and interned Wałęsa in a country house in a remote spot. In November 1982, Wałęsa was released and reinstated at the Gdansk shipyards. Although kept under surveillance, he managed to maintain lively contact with Solidarity leaders in the underground.

Wałęsa was celebrated worldwide as a symbol of hope for freedom. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983.

At Solidarity’s second national congress in 1990, Wałęsa was elected chairman with more than 74 percent of the votes. On the general ballot, he was elected President of the Republic of Poland. He served until defeated in the election of 1995.

Under his leadership, he made Poland a model of economic and political reform for the rest of Eastern Europe to follow, earning his country one of the first invitations to join an expanded NATO.

“President Walesa played a significant role in world politics at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and his work is something we still discuss in political science,” said Dave Dulio, Director of the Center for Civic Engagement. “Indeed, he significantly changed Poland and impacted the world.”

Wałęsa still remains active in Polish politics, although he does not hold a government office. Since the end of his presidency, Wałęsa has lectured on Central European history and politics at various universities and organizations. In 1996, he founded the Lech Wałęsa Institute, a think tank whose mission is to support democracy and local governments in Poland and throughout the world.

Wałęsa has also written three books: *Droga nadziei* (The Road of Hope, 1987), *Droga do wolności* (The Road to Freedom, 1991), and *Wszystko, co robię, robię dla Polski* (All That I Do, I Do for Poland, 1995).

The Varner Vitality Lecture Series is named in honor of Oakland’s first chancellor, Durward “Woody” Varner. The series aims to energize and sustain the highest academic and scholarly aspirations of the university community. Previous speakers include Dr. A.P.J.

Abdul Kalam, former president of India; Dr. Madeleine Albright, the first female U.S. Secretary of State; Dr. Jane Goodall, world-renowned primatologist; Bill Nye, scientist, author and TV host; and Doris Kearns Goodwin, presidential historian and Pulitzer Prize-winning author.

The event is free and open to the public. For more information on the series, please call (248) 370-2190.

The Varner Vitality Lecture Series is presented annually by the Division of Academic Affairs. The Center for Civic Engagement assisted in coordinating the visit of Lech Wałęsa.

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