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Newly focused Alumni Weekend draws thousands

December 01, 2008 | Teresa Dunham

Invitations to Liberty University's first ever Alumni Weekend went out months in advance, and the Alumni Relations Office waited with anticipation to roll out the welcome mat Oct. 23-25, 2008. When that weekend finally arrived, LU officials had two words for the 4,000-plus faces who returned to Lynchburg, Va., to reunite with their university family: Welcome home.

A New Tradition

Alumni Weekend 2008 was unlike any other Homecoming at Liberty University, combining nostalgic traditions with plenty of new activities, such as a Business Executives Day, 5K race, pep rally in the newly built Tilley Student Center, Alumni Convocation, carless drive-in movie, drawing for free weekend accommodations at the Carter Glass Mansion and more.

"Overall, I think it was a really strong weekend. We were trying to add more events, so we expanded it. This was the first year of going from Homecoming to an Alumni Weekend," said Melissa Small, director of Alumni Relations and Marketing.

Die-hard fans donned ponchos and braved the rain for a Homecoming parade on Saturday — and the sun came out just in time for a Flames football 42-0 shutout victory over Charleston Southern in the sold-out Williams Stadium. At half-time and post-game, the crowd enjoyed musical performances by Michael Tait, an LU alumnus who was part of the hit Christian band dc Talk.

Earlier that day, LU assembled its first-ever Alumni 5K race.

"They ran in the rain, and they were just incredible," Small said.

Getting Down to Business

Alumni Weekend festivities officially kicked off with Business Executives Day on Thursday. Professionals from a variety of fields spoke to students and took advantage of a networking fair to recruit LU students as future interns and employees.

Among the speakers who visited classes and gave presentations in an alumni panel was Elizabeth David, the wellness director for Chick-fil-A headquarters in Atlanta. She told students about how she's using the exercise science degree she earned from Liberty in 2003. She also spent time exploring the campus.

"I was amazed at how much Liberty has grown," she said. "I was blown away."

Friday ushered in the Alumni Convocation, Chancellor's Dinner, pep rally, and evening volleyball and men's hockey games, as well as trips to ScareMare.

The morning convocation included a presentation of the new Outstanding Alumnus Award to Jeremy Emory, Class of 2000, who changed his major to pastoral studies with only a semester left before graduation — a bold act of faith. Since that time, Emory has served as a youth pastor at McGregor Baptist Church in Florida and recently moved to Asheville, N.C., to start a college ministry. Fellow alumni nominated their favorite alumnus for the award.

Justin Terry, director of the new Student Alumni Association, also presented an Outstanding Future Champion for Christ Award and one-year scholarship to pre-med freshman Ashley Hunt. The association is focused on building a bridge between current students and LU alumni.

After the awards, students and alumni viewed a dynamic video chronicling Liberty University's growth, changes and continued Christian focus throughout the decades, from the 1970s to the present. The video was narrated by Liberty co-founder Dr. Elmer Towns and elicited many cheers from the crowd when LU personalities such as distinguished professor Dr. Ed Hindson and Vice Chancellor Dr. Ron Godwin were depicted in their younger years.

That evening, nearly 150 alumni gathered at the Chancellor's Dinner for a delicious meal and listened to an address from Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr.

"It was good to see alumni show such an interest in what's happening here," he said. "They wanted to hear the inside story on where we're going and how things are proceeding. Afterward I got to shake hands with all of them and talk to them a little bit. It was a lot of warm support from that group."

He expressed his appreciation for their attendance and emphasized that LU's future depends upon its alumni.

"In the past it's been older donors who believe in Christian education who have supported Liberty, but we're going to have to ask our alumni to do more and more because that's the backbone of financial support for any college," Falwell said recently. "We deeply appreciate the support from all the alumni and all the people who traveled from great distances to be here."

A Nostalgic Experience

For Falwell, a 1984 alumnus, and his wife Becki, who attended LU in the mid 1980s, Alumni Weekend was a time of memories and encouragement. Falwell said he especially enjoyed the Alumni Baseball Game and the general meet-and-greet with all alumni and special guests. Becki said she enjoyed the Homecoming Day activities as well.

“I always enjoy the football games and being able to feed as many kids as possible. My motherly instinct kicks in,” she said.

For 1991 graduate Mike Linch, senior pastor of NorthStar Church in Georgia, the memories that flooded back as he walked around the campus were vivid and sweet. He passed by Dorm 18, where he lived for three years, and the baseball diamond where he played ball. He also surveyed Dorm Circle, where his wife and then-girlfriend Anne lived, and he found the spot behind the Carter Glass Mansion where he kneeled on one knee in the mud and proposed to her.

“I would say it’s where I grew up,” he said.

Brian Johnson, who graduated in 1988 with a finance degree, may have recruited a next-generation Flame that weekend.

“My 11-year-old son thought it was great. He said he looks forward to going to college. I had to explain to him that ... it’s not all Homecoming weekends,” Johnson said. “But it was a good time, and the impression he came away with is that he thought it was great. He’d love to go there, which certainly made me proud.”