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Liberty University

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Then and Now: Alumni Weekend brings generations of Liberty graduates together

December 01, 2009

Thousands of alumni, representing every class since the early days of Lynchburg Baptist College to recent graduates, reconnected with former classmates, professors and friends during Liberty University's Alumni Weekend.

The nostalgic "Then and Now" October weekend was packed with exciting activities, including the Homecoming football game, tailgating and parade, bonfire, pep rally, trail race, Chancellor's Dinner, Business Executive Luncheon, Alumni Reception, athletics events and reunions, campus tours and more.

New to the mix this year were batteaux rides to Treasure Island (the site of Liberty's early years on the James River), the new Liberty Mountain Snowflex Centre, a Christian hip-hop concert, an alumni service project and a special Alumni Reception.

Nearly 1,000 alumni attended the reception on Saturday, Oct. 17.

"We had alumni from all decades," said Melissa Small, Liberty University's director of Alumni Relations. "The 'Jeopardy!' skit with impersonations of Dr. [Elmer] Towns, Dr. Danny Lovett, Dr. [Ed] Hindson and V.P. for Executive Projects and Media Reations Johnnie Moore touched on memories and brought humor to the event."

Cool temperatures and a lack of rain made for perfect fall football weather on Saturday, bringing in a large, spirited crowd to Williams Stadium to witness the Flames' 58-13 victory over Coastal Carolina.

"It was great that Liberty was able to show how the football team has grown and flourished over the years," Small said. "A lot of alumni and former players were excited to see the program grow and were very impressed with the stadium, the attendance and the crowd participation."

Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr. and his wife, Becki, participated in events throughout the weekend. Alumni especially enjoyed seeing how much the campus has changed, Falwell said, and were encouraged to see so many more students having some of the same experiences they had on Liberty Mountain.

"The alumni from past decades expressed their delight at the growth and prosperity they saw at Liberty, but more importantly, they were thrilled to see that Liberty remained committed to its original Christian mission," Falwell said. "This was encouraging to all of us, and we deeply appreciate the faithfulness of our alumni in helping to make Liberty what it is today!"

CHANCELLOR'S DINNER

The Alumni Weekend Chancellor's Dinner was held in Liberty's new Barrick-Falwell Lodge at the Liberty Mountain Snowflex Centre, North America's first snowless ski slope. During the steak dinner, alumni were able to watch through the lodge windows as snowboarders and skiers practiced tricks and made runs down the mountain.

WorldHelp founder and Liberty graduate Vernon Brewer ('71) and son, current student Josh Brewer, were the keynote speakers of the evening. Vernon was presented the Alumnus of the Year Award by Liberty's Alumni Relations Office.

Vernon Brewer reminisced about the many warm memories he made while on campus during Liberty's pioneer days, including the moment when he became Liberty University's first official graduate — by default.

"I transferred to Liberty and finished my degree work in one year while I served on staff at Thomas Road Baptist Church," Brewer told the room full of alumni. "I remember there were eight of us at that first Commencement, and Dr. Falwell was so proud. We wore choir robes and no one's last name began with an 'A' and mine began with a 'B', so not because of any academic distinction on my part, but just by luck of the draw I became the first graduate, and I'm very proud to be a part of this university."

Brewer's son Josh, a sophomore studying criminal justice and strategic intelligence, spoke on what the campus and student body are like today.

"We have such a great support system here, and I think that's what makes Liberty still such a success," Josh said. "Students will go out of their way to help other people."

Josh also recognized the role that alumni had in shaping the school, as many alumni even helped to physically build and renovate campus buildings when the school did not have a maintenance crew.

"I just want to say thank you to all of you alumni. Thank you for everything you have done to make this university what it is," he said.

Chancellor Falwell also spoke at the event and told alumni how Snowflex has become an important recruitment tool for Liberty and is the fulfillment of his father's, Jerry Falwell, Sr.'s, goal to "use every available means to reach every available person."

For many non-local alumni, the weekend marked their first exposure to LMSC.

"The alumni really enjoyed their time on Snowflex," Small said. "They skied, tubed and took lessons. People who had been here two, 10 or 20 years ago all were blown away."

BUSINESS EXECUTIVE LUNCHEON

Alumni Weekend's second annual Business Executive Luncheon brought business alumni and local businesses together for an opportunity to further support the university.

Hosted by Liberty's Alumni Relations Office and the Career Center, the luncheon helped to make connections with local community business owners and alumni for the opportunity to mentor and employ current Liberty students.

Business executives are encouraged to become mentors by sharing life experience, one-on-one networking, job shadowing and internships. Business is one of the top three majors at the university and one in 10 students major in business.

"Alumni and local businesses that support Liberty are crucial to our current students and our future," Small told attendees. Small also thanked alumni and local businesses for the roles they have already played in the lives of many Liberty students.

During the meal, three Liberty alumni shared about their experiences at Liberty and how their education helped them in their current business endeavors.

Josh Oppenheimer ('96) of Prototype Advertising attributed his success in the business world to much of what he learned at Liberty. He said he is also thankful for the meaningful friendships he was able to build and keep with people he met as a student.

Audrey MacDowell ('90) with Mary Kay spoke about the importance of growing in your relationship with God.

"As leaders it's important we have a mentor and that we be a mentor to others," MacDowell emphasized. "I was molded spiritually here and mentored by godly leaders."

Vernon Brewer ('71) was also present for this event. He reminisced about the early days as a student. He also spoke about how Dr. Jerry Falwell encouraged him to "depend on God by faith" through his teaching and by example.

The luncheon came to a close following the warm regards of Rex Hammond, president of the Lynchburg Chamber of Commerce.

"Liberty is itself an important economic force in our community and an essential part of our sector of colleges and universities that play such an important role in our regional economy."

A GROUP EFFORT

Small said the involvement of many members of the Liberty community led to the success of this year's Alumni Weekend.

"The deans were very involved this year, hosting open houses, putting together alumni panels, participating in the reception and providing opportunities for alumni to connect with their past professors," she said. "Everyone really got involved this year. From the Career Center to

Athletics to the faculty and staff — it wasn't just the Alumni office that put this on. Everyone joined in to make sure the alumni felt welcomed and at home.”

“Then and Now” was selected as the weekend's theme because of Liberty's continuous growth and development over a relatively short span of existence.

“The whole university has been through such rapid change, and identifying with each alumnus and making them feel like this is their school is very important to us,” Small said. “A lot of alumni were able to identify with what they remember from their time here, on top of the people they knew, to relate to the campus, professors and experiences they had here.”

Mitzi Bible, Carmen P. Fleischauer, Sarah Funderburke and Tara Maxwell contributed to this story.