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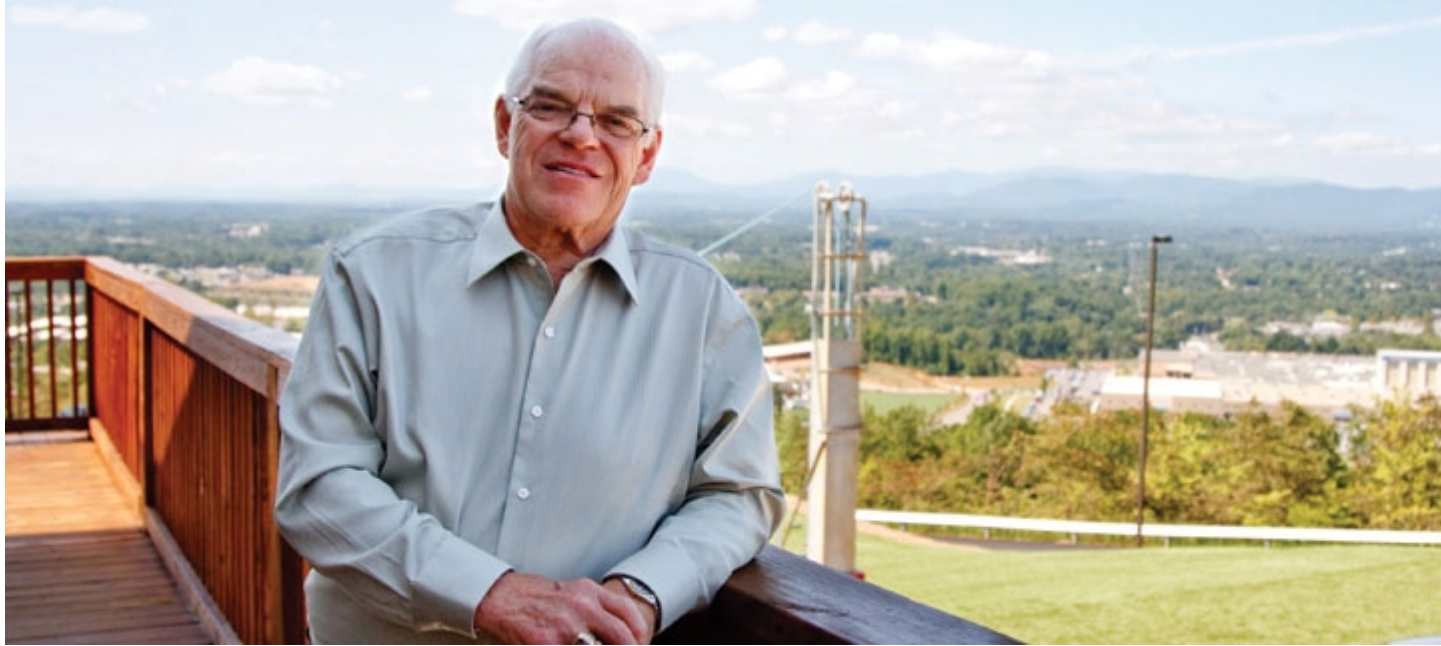
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Burning Bright: LU youth-ministry ‘pioneers’ return for special reunion

December 01, 2009 | Sarah Funderburke

When Liberty University opened its doors in 1971 as Lynchburg Baptist College, many of its first students were asked to pick up a hammer and help build the dorms. These pioneer-style days brought many Liberty students together in a shared mission. It didn't matter to these students if they had nice dormitories and campus facilities; they were passionate about learning and ministry — and if that meant they had to put up a few walls on the way, so be it.

That unique bond hasn't diminished in the past 38 years, and on Sept. 10-13 more than 300 of these Liberty alumni attended a reunion for Youth Ministry majors and students who participated in youth ministry-related organizations on campus, including Youth Aflame. The reunion was a four-day event featuring tours of Liberty's campus, lunch with Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr. at the Liberty Mountain Snowflex Centre, a Youth Aflame banquet, Liberty's first home football game of the season, a cookout and more.



Gordon Luff, Liberty's first Youth Ministry professor and dean of students, was the keynote speaker at the Youth Aflame banquet.

"In those days, on any given weekend there was no student body on campus. They were out running programs at Thomas Road [Baptist Church], or they were out in ministry," Luff said.

The dedication of Liberty's first students surprised Luff when he arrived on campus in 1971. Although he was excited to help Liberty start up its youth ministry major, he had not anticipated that the entire student body would become part of that movement. There were 37 youth ministry majors that first year, but most other students on campus also got involved with their events.

"If you wanted to do something on campus you hung around with the youth ministry guys," Richard Zazuetta ('75) said.

Luff wanted to create youth events that would appeal to the new generation of students. He hoped that Liberty's new degree program would initiate some positive changes in the field of youth ministry.

"The Youth Aflame philosophy is very distinct. It's a movement that said traditional methods of church youth work were not working and new and innovative ideas were necessary to change that," Luff explained. "The primary one being the training of a professional person to lead the youth program, and that necessitates at least a college degree."



When Liberty created an entire major specifically focused on youth ministry in 1971, it was one of the first colleges in the country to do so. Luff, who had been working in the youth ministry field for more than 10 years at that point, felt that many churches didn't understand the importance of youth groups and youth programs and events. A handful of kids attempting to cook hot dogs over a small campfire was not Luff's idea of what youth group activities should look like. Luff wanted the students in Liberty's youth ministry program to see youth work as a vital part of the church's ministry — not an afterthought.

"My first salary as a youth pastor was \$10 a week," Luff said. "I had to teach at the Christian school attached to the church in order to survive."

One of Luff's first events sponsored by the school's youth ministry program is still among LU's most popular outreach tools: Scaremare. Luff also started the western round-ups, which were held in an old dairy barn on campus, before anything was built on the property.

Luff said his motto was, "If you're gonna throw an event, do it first class and do it with enthusiasm."

Today Luff's first students and volunteers are spread across the world and are involved in a variety of career fields, churches and ministries.

"They are teaching youth work all over the world, and they even get paid enough to live now," Luff joked.



Falwell recognized this group during a reunion luncheon Friday, Sept. 11 at the new Barrick-Falwell Lodge at the Liberty Mountain Snowflex Centre and at Friday morning convocation.

“Without these pioneering students ... and the sacrifices they were willing to make, I’m not sure it would have been possible to build a university like this from scratch,” Falwell said during convocation. “The university owes a great debt of gratitude ... for the investment they made in the lives of students in the 1970s. They represent one of the most critical and important chapters in the rich history of this institution.”

Liberty co-founder Dr. Elmer Towns also spoke at the luncheon and told the alumni they were an amazing group for believing in the mission of the college before there were any buildings on campus.

“We wanted to be as grounded in the local church and evangelism as possible,” Towns said. “You made that possible. I don’t believe that any school has trained as many people for ministry as Liberty University.”

To find out about other reunions and alumni events at Liberty and in your area, please contact the Alumni Relations Office at alumni@liberty.edu or (800) 628-7973.