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Testimony in Teaching

October 01, 2009 | Teresa Dunham

Long before Liberty University history professor Donna Davis Donald caught a glimpse of God's plan for her life, He was working through her parents to bring her to LU.

“When I was 14, the only thing that brought us to this town was the ministry. My parents just believed that this was the place that we were supposed to be, so they sacrificed everything,” she said.

Hard-working people who placed a high value on Christian education, her parents often watched the Old Time Gospel Hour and listened to the solid preaching of LU founder Dr. Jerry Falwell. Eventually, they felt led to send their children to Liberty Christian Academy.

“My dad gave up all his seniority at his job [in North Carolina], put in for a transfer, sold the house and moved to Lynchburg,” she said. “I was very resentful because this meant I had to leave all my friends and my school and everything else, but it turns out it was the most selfless, sacrificial decision they could've ever made.”

Looking back, Donald said, she might not be a professor at LU today if it weren't for her parents' act of faith.

SEARCHING FOR THE TRUTH

At LCA, Donald received a strong Christian education and also met her husband of 28 years, Mike.

“We dated all through high school and then got married after my first year at Liberty,” said Donald, 46, who graduated from LCA in 1980. Current LU Chancellor Jerry Falwell, Jr. was in her graduating class.

Naturally, Donald enrolled in classes at Liberty University — but she didn’t know what she wanted to do with her life. She kept switching majors, ultimately deciding to quit school and get married.

“For several years, we sort of walked away from God,” she said. “Growing up in Christian homes, I think we both had a sense that we’d missed something somehow, which, of course, is not true.”

It took the birth of her son, Tommy, now 22, for Donald to rethink her values. Gazing at her little boy, she could only think about bringing him up in an atmosphere of goodness and truth.

“So I began to ask questions about my faith and to really explore it for myself, and when I did, of course I turned to the Scriptures,” said Donald. “I had this incredible desire to know God, and I couldn’t get enough of the Word. I just read it and read it several times through.”

Soon she started memorizing Scriptures, attending church regularly and being active in the local congregation. The more she read God’s word, the more passionate she became about doing something for Him. As a stay-at-home mom and “church lady” who had stints as a railroad worker and J. Crew phone representative, she wasn’t sure what she could offer, but she surrendered herself to His will.

An incredible calling Not long after that, in 1995, she decided to return to Liberty.

“I always loved to learn. I never stopped reading books. I was always educating myself,” she said.

She hadn’t chosen a major before she went back, but the Western Civilization class she took during her first semester gave her the answer. As someone who loved supporting missionaries, the cross-cultural aspect of history appealed to Donald.

“It just set off a spark in me,” she said.

She decided to major in history, but she thought God wanted her to do something even bigger.

“It became so clear to me through that semester that God was calling me to teach, and He was calling me to be a college professor,” she said. “I was like Sarah [from the Bible]. When I first

had that thought, it made me laugh out loud. It seemed so out of the realm, so ridiculous to me that I could be a college professor.”

After all, she was 32 and just starting college. She was embarrassed to tell anyone what she was thinking — but when she did, no one laughed.

Affirmed by her husband, parents and friends, she began working toward her goal while balancing her roles as a wife and mother. With plenty of encouragement, she finished her studies at LU in 1998 and then commuted to the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, completing her master’s degree in 2001.

She started at Liberty as an adjunct history instructor not long after that, working her way up to full time. In 2006, she earned the title of Assistant Professor.

Now in her eighth year at LU, teaching Western Civilization and an upper-level class on the Renaissance and Reformation, Donald is also the faculty advisor of LU’s Phi Alpha Theta history honor society.

A CONSTANT TESTIMONY

While teaching at LU, Donald started commuting to George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., to pursue her Ph.D. in Early Modern European History. Juggling her own studies with her duties at LU sometimes meant waking up early and getting home very late, but now she has advanced to Ph.D. candidacy and completed all of the requirements except her dissertation.

“I tell my story at the beginning of every semester to all of my classes,” Donald said. “It’s not because of anything I’ve done, but it’s because of God’s grace and my willingness to surrender that he’s placed me in the position where I can have complete and total fulfillment and joy in what I do every day. And I think that’s available for anybody who’s following the Lord if they make themselves open to that.”

These days, she remains passionate about teaching at LU. She is proud to offer strong academic classes in a Christian setting, and she’s committed to furthering LU’s mission.

Along the way, she has impressed her colleagues and inspired her students.

“She opened my eyes to see that history is a testament to the greatness of God in glorifying himself through the actions of human beings,” said Jordan Jones, a former student. “In her classes I sat not only at her feet, but also at the feet of many great men and women whose wisdom cries out to be heard by the world of believers today. If Professor Donald had not exposed me to Thomas Aquinas, Augustine, Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Queen Elizabeth I, and many others, I would not have graduated with quite the accurate and biblical view of the world that I am now privileged to have.”