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A witness to the vision: Planned Giving officer knew Dr. Jerry Falwell as pastor, boss and friend

December 01, 2009 ¦ Mitzi Bible

Harold Knowles and Jerry Falwell, Sr. were strangers when, at the same time, they made the most important decision a person can make in life. Harold was 14 and Jerry, 18, when they walked down the aisle at Park Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg in 1952 to accept Christ as their personal savior.

Harold and Jerry, along with about 13 other youth, were later baptized together. “Out of that group,” Harold said, “God picked Jerry out.”

He means God had chosen Falwell to start a ministry that would grow beyond anyone’s imagination. Falwell soon became Harold’s youth director at Park Avenue, still at the tender age of 18.

“But he didn’t appear to be 18,” Knowles clarified. “Jerry always had the appearance of being older than he was; I guess maturity would be the word. When he was 18 or 19, he acted like somebody who’d be 25 or 30.”

Knowles said he soon learned that that was because God had a plan that required a strong leader.

“In my heart, I saw then a man that God was really going to use,” he said.

Now, Knowles jumps at the opportunity to share stories about Falwell, his longtime friend and co-worker.

As a Planned Giving officer at Liberty University, he gets that opportunity often as he visits LU supporters throughout Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, helping them with their estate plans. His wife, Ann, accompanies him, often tending to the personal needs of donors, many who are elderly and do not have family nearby. The couple sees it as their own personal mission field and has even gone so far as to help manage some donors' medical care when there are no family members to take care of them.

Because so many of the donors are 65 or older, they can recall learning of Jerry Falwell as he became a public figure during the Moral Majority years and followed his success as a pastor and college administrator. Having someone visit them who has a direct tie with Liberty's founder is a plus.

"When I go into homes of our donors, it's a very good impact on them because they'll ask me right off how long I've been here. I say I've worked this job for 31 years and started with Jerry when the church was started," he said. "It makes them very comfortable to share their financial situation with me."

He said as an ambassador for Liberty, he also tells them how he witnessed Falwell's vision for the college become a reality. "I remember the first time I rode around with him [here] and he had just purchased the property [for the college]. He took my wife and I and drove us up in his station wagon. It had been raining and the mud was knee-deep. He got out and said, 'I'm going to have dormitories here, and this here,' and kept naming buildings. All it was was just flat land with trees … the mansion was here and an old barn was here," he said. "If you look at it now, everything is where he was pointing."

Knowles has watched the campus grow over the years; it holds many memories for him and his family. His three children are Liberty alumni and he's a proud grandparent of two alumni (with one attending Liberty now). Knowles earned a degree himself — a Bachelor of Science in Business from LU's Distance Learning Program (now called Liberty University Online). He also holds a theology degree from Tennessee Temple University.

As a Planned Giving officer since 1978, Knowles has met many others who share a fond love for Liberty. Their gifts have helped the ministry become what it is today.

"I feel like in 30 years I've averaged $2 million [in donations] a year, either in deferred or upfront cash," he said. "I can honestly say God's used me to bring in at least $60 million."

But he's quick to give credit where it's due.

"People didn't give to this school because of me; they gave their funds here because of Jerry's testimony. They knew he was sincere. I was just a tool, knocking on the door, presenting the work here."

He said Falwell had much to do with the recent increase in charitable funds to LU, even after his passing in May 2007.

“Seeing Dr. Falwell leave $24 million to Liberty in his life insurance policy has made a great impact on donors. They think, ‘If Jerry did that, then that’s something we can do.’ We’re very fortunate that he did that,” he said, adding “but I’d rather have the man than the $24 million, myself.”

That’s because even as Falwell was Knowles’ boss for many years, the friendship they created as teenagers remained.

“We talked about him having three hats,” Knowles said. “He was my pastor, my boss and my friend. When I would go make an appointment with him and go in his office, he would always ask me, ‘What hat do you want me to wear?’ What I think was so sweet was if I said, ‘my boss,’ he would sit behind the desk and talk to me that way; if I said, ‘my pastor,’ or ‘my friend,’ he would come around and sit on that sofa with me.”

As a friend, Jerry invited Knowles to travel with him all over the country, meeting many dignitaries and going out to dinner with well-known pastors and political leaders.

But the memories of Jerry Falwell in the simplest of settings are just as precious to Knowles. Like the very first time the two met.

“I met Macel [Falwell] first. I was taking piano lessons from Macel during high school. She had met Jerry, and they started dating. We would be sitting on the piano bench, she and I. Then he would come in about middle ways. He would sit on the stool with us.”

“Today I can’t play the piano, and I blame it on him,” he said, laughing. “I was no competition to him. He kept fiddling and talking to her — I gave it up.”

But Knowles is grateful for Jerry’s persistence when it came to carrying out his vision for Liberty University.

“He worked hard at it. To me, he never let his vision blur,” he said. “He had a focus to build a great school for the Lord, and he never wavered. He never turned back or got discouraged even when the money didn’t come in or there were big problems in the past. He just kept pushing; he knew God was going to do that someday … and you can see the results.”

To find out how a planned giving officer can help you plan for the future, call (800) 543-5309 or go to www.lugiving.com.