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Burial garden visitors honor Dr. Falwell

May 15, 2008 | Teresa Dunham

A steady stream of visitors made their way to the gravesite of Dr. Jerry Falwell Thursday, May 15 to honor the one-year anniversary of the Christian visionary's death.

Falwell's on-campus memorial drew many students, staff and community members to briefly reflect, share stories, or just gaze at the eternal flame lit nearby. Some stayed longer than others, but the remembrances were constant for the man who founded Liberty University and Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va.

Matthew Smith, a 23-year-old nursing and music student, said it's hard to believe that a year has passed.

"None of us saw this happening a year ago. We all thought, 'This guy is like the Titanic, and unless God is finished with him, he's going to go on,'" Smith said.

Smith only spoke with Falwell personally one time, but that single meeting left a big impression on the young man.

"He was your grandfather around campus. He brought out the best in everyone," Smith said. "He always took a stand, and you don't see that too much today."

Though Smith won't get to shake Falwell's hand when he graduates, he believes it's all part of a plan that's greater than his own understanding.

"It's sad that he's gone, but I know that this is God's mountain, and his work marches on," he said.

Nearby, campus pastor Dwayne Carson sat on a bench close to the memorial fountain and eternal flame. Gazing intently, he recalled the first time he ever met Jerry Falwell.

At the time, Carson was an unsaved 18-year-old with a pack of beer in his fist. Not shying away, Falwell shook his hand.

"That made an impact on me. I'd look back and remember that he was friendly toward sinners," said Carson, who later came to know the Lord and join the ministry on campus.

Carson said he always admired the way Falwell could laugh and joke — but could also preach the Word of God with powerful conviction. Yet, above all, Carson remembers Falwell as an encourager.

"He'd call you up and see how you're doing. That's what I miss. I haven't deleted his name off my phone. That's been a whole year. ... I just haven't been able to delete it," he said.

For Thomas Road Baptist Church singles pastor Jay Rebsamen, the day of Falwell's death is still etched in his memory.

"I remember vividly what I was doing a year ago when ... Dr. Falwell died and I got the news," he said. "It was hard, and it still is hard. It was hard to come here [to the memorial]."

Yet he's excited to see what God will do in the lives of Falwell's sons. Jerry Falwell Jr. is now chancellor of the university, and Jonathan Falwell is senior pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church.

"I think he would be pleased," said associate professor of government Tom Metallo, referring to the leadership roles Falwell's sons have assumed. Driving to the memorial site, Metallo said a prayer for the Falwell family. "He was loved by the students, and he was available to the students," Metallo recalled. "He wasn't afraid to speak on the issues. That was one of the things that I liked most about him."

Along with current students and faculty, Liberty University alumni also paid their respects. Among them was Jamie George, who attended LU from 1988-1992.

"I am reminded how wonderful Dr. Falwell was as a person, and I am reminded of his great vision. If there's one thing I have taken away from Liberty, it is to always live a life with big vision," said George, who now pastors the Journey Ecclesia church in Nashville, Tenn.

As George reflected, several members of the Thomas Road Baptist Church also started to gather.

"The first time I came here today was to honor my pastor. I just feel the need to be here," said 21-year-old Mark Creasey II, of TRBC. "I miss him a lot."

TRBC choir members Ruby Orellana and Sara Quarmout were also drawn to the site.

"I came here today to celebrate his life in heaven," said Orellana, who watched Falwell for many years on television before she ever met him in person. "He inspired me so much when I saw him on the television ... and I thought, one day when I marry, my children will go to that college."

Orellana moved to Lynchburg from Maryland three years ago—and her dream came true when her son Miguel Orellana, 21, began attending LU as a business student. In a way, she said, Falwell's work changed her life.

Meanwhile, Quarmout recalled that Falwell knew her name after the very first time they met—and he never forgot it. She also remembered how much Falwell encouraged the singers at her church.

"I know that Dr. Falwell always admired the choir," she said. "I remember him every day of my life."

One of Falwell's most cherished friends, Dr. Ron Godwin, also came to the memorial. Godwin is Liberty University's executive vice president and chief operating officer — and he's the person Jerry Falwell ate meals with every workday for the last 10 years.

"I came out this morning before office obligations just to remember all the wonderful years of friendship, service, and labor together that Dr. Falwell and I experienced," Godwin said.

Standing by the memorial, Godwin spoke about Falwell as a boss, a superior, and a friend.

"Doc and I had breakfast together the morning he passed," Godwin said, adding that it was an honor to know someone with so much wisdom and determination.

Now that Falwell is gone, Godwin said, the university is still going strong because of its founder's wisdom.

"The university is doing great, and that's largely because of the forethought, planning, and wise transition that Dr. Falwell prepared for when he was ... in good health," Godwin said.