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Shaping spiritual leadership

December 01, 2009 | Sarah Blanzly

In 1984, a young man came to Liberty University and was assigned a room in Dorm 18-1. That young man came to get an education, and he still hasn't left.

Born on a 1,300-acre farm in Madison Heights, Va., Dwayne Carson was raised in a religious home, and his family attended a small Methodist church. When he was 12, he began to realize he would be a church leader someday.

At 18, Carson led the Easter sunrise service at his church. In front of the congregation, the preacher looked at Carson and told him that one day he would be a pastor. Although Carson was not yet a Christian, he knew this was the call of God on his life.

After Carson graduated from high school, his "religion" wasn't strong enough to keep him close to the Lord, and he strayed from the faith of his childhood. He stopped going to church and was determined to live his own life, thinking he didn't really need God. A young churchgoer invited him to Sunday service. Carson sat on the back row and shortly after, he surrendered his heart to Jesus on Feb. 15, 1983. Most of his life, God was part of his religion, but on that night, Carson recalls, "I called Him Father."

A year later, Carson came to Liberty University. Little did he know that when he set foot on Liberty Mountain, he would spend not only four years earning a degree, but a good part of the rest of his life serving there.

Within the first week, Carson was asked to become a prayer leader (PL). This position opened his eyes to the powerful ministry that Liberty's student leadership program offers. He became a resident assistant (RA) the following year.

Carson graduated in 1987 and attended Liberty's seminary.

After graduation Carson met with Dr. Jerry Falwell, Sr. to discuss potential job opportunities at Thomas Road Baptist Church, and the idea of hiring campus pastors for Liberty University was discussed. Falwell asked if Carson would be interested. Carson responded, "Yeah, I like working with college students." "Who knew," he said recently, "that that statement ... would now have me in my 21st year as a campus pastor?"

GET TO KNOW DWAYNE CARSON

Favorite Food: *Steak and Lobster*

Favorite Movie: *Miracle*

Favorite Book: *The Bible*

Favorite Band: *Casting Crowns*

Favorite Vacation Spot: *Historical Williamsburg*

Favorite Quote: *"Though you cannot go back and make a brand new start, you can start today with Christ and make a brand new end." –John Maxwell*

Favorite Scripture: *Joshua 24:15 "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."*

On June 4, 1988, Carson married Donita Hershey, whom he met at Liberty. When he arrived home from his honeymoon, he received a call from Rob Jackson, the associate dean of men, telling him that Falwell had hired them both as campus pastors. Carson was given the responsibility of Sunday school, directing prayer leaders and leading a "team called Spiritual Life Directors (SLDs)," he said.

At the time, Carson wasn't sure that Liberty needed SLDs, and began to work with the prayer leaders.

Six weeks later Carson was overwhelmed and realized he did, in fact, need SLDs. SLDs help administrate the spiritual programs that foster spiritual development of the students on their hall. They also take a primary role with PLs to minister, mentor and equip them for their ministry.

LU has more than 900 PLs and more than 200 SLDs.

Carson has seen the Office of Student Leadership (OSL) grow in ways that could only have been dreamed about 20 years ago. "A lot of what we have been wanting to see is now in place," Carson said.

The OSL is currently working to encourage its alumni to become more actively involved in supporting the ministry through prayer, finances, networking and more. Carson expressed excitement about the OSL alumni whose children come to Liberty with the mindset of serving on student leadership. "It creates incredible momentum for the student leadership program," Carson said.

Much of Carson's work in student leadership has been influenced and shaped by the teachings of John Maxwell — personally, as well as through books — Tim Elmore and conferences such as Catalyst. However, Carson says, "I credit, without question, Dr. Elmer Towns for his incredible support. He just has a way of inspiring you to want to be your very best for God."

"I think there would be a major void at this university in accomplishing the mission of Training Champions for Christ without the Office of Student Leadership," Carson said. "Make no mistake, there is only one real reason I'm at Liberty University — because of the vision that we get to Train Champions for Christ."