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Falwell Jr. reflects on year one

April 29, 2008 | Ron Brown

On May 15, Jerry Falwell Jr. will have been Liberty University's chancellor for one year. He assumed the chancellor's position following the death of his father, LU co-founder Dr. Jerry Falwell.

Falwell Jr. is determined for LU to continue to embrace the Christ-centered education his father so deeply espoused.

"Just because I'm from a younger generation doesn't mean I want the school to become something different," he said. "I want to stay true to Dad's original vision."

In the past 12 months, the Liberty community has seen record growth in its resident enrollment and distance learning program under the guidance of Falwell Jr., a 1984 Liberty alumnus and 1987 graduate of the University of Virginia School of Law.

The school has continued to receive record donations in its bid to build endowment.

While Falwell Jr.'s public persona has grown, he has been a behind-the-scenes participant in decision making for many years.

"I think his first year as chancellor has gone amazingly well," said Dr. Ron Godwin, LU's chief operating officer and executive vice president. "One of the most gratifying and encouraging aspects has been to see how greatly Jerry Jr. has come to enjoy many of the responsibilities of being chancellor," Godwin said. "Dr. Falwell worked very closely with Jerry Jr. regarding policy, financing and personnel decisions on a routine, daily basis.

Dr. Falwell was not making hardly a single decision without consulting with his oldest son."

Since last May, Falwell Jr. and his wife, Becki, have built relationships with faculty, staff and students as he charts the course for LU's future.

During the following interview, he talked about his plans, his accomplishments and the lessons he's learned during his first year in LU's top post.

What lessons have you learned during your first year as chancellor?

I see Liberty from a different perspective than I did before. When you're responsible for the whole thing, you look at it differently. Instead of trying to promote this program or that one, you're looking at the whole picture and trying to do what is good for the whole university. The biggest thing I have learned is how important this whole university is in today's world. The culture is bombarding these kids with so many things that my generation and generations before were never exposed to.

Does what you've learned in your first year as chancellor make you respect your Dad even more?

Yes. We're not facing what he faced. We've got money in the bank and we've got no debt. We've got a campus and the student body is already built. He didn't have any of that when he started with Liberty. He just had a dream and a vision and went night and day to make it happen. It wasn't clear then where we would end up. We have all the advantages that he didn't have.

Do you like your job as chancellor?

I do. All the parts of the job that I thought I would dislike are the parts I like the most. I enjoy the interaction with the students and the faculty. I like it better than what I was doing before as vice chancellor. Before, I was just working on the business side, behind the scenes. There's a greater sense of accomplishment doing what I'm doing now because you can see a real impact. Before, it was more of a supporting role.

Are there ways that your approach differs from your Dad's?

Probably. In his earlier years, his approach was similar to mine now. He travelled with student groups and played baskets with all of them. I'm out with the students as much as I can be. Becki and I have had large groups of students over to the house. I identify with these students because 25 years ago I was sitting where they are now. I'm a graduate of Liberty. I'm not a pastor. Dad was a pastor. That's a big difference. He was preaching to the students every week. My leadership is more on the administrative, student life and business side. Because I was doing some of those things before, there was not as big a transition as you might think. I was involved day-to-day in every aspect of running the college for almost 20 years.

Do you have a desire for Liberty to be seen as part of the fabric of Lynchburg?

It already is. Everywhere you go in Lynchburg, it seems that a good number of employees at businesses are Liberty students. Most of the new apartment projects around town are populated with Liberty students. Ten thousand students in a city this size, plus all the staff to support that, the impact has to be pervasive.

Is it hard to balance your time between being chancellor and being a father and husband?

I still have two kids at home. Wesley, age 14, and Caroline, age 7. My son Trey is a freshman at Liberty. I've gotten better at not opening up my computer on the weekends. That is more important now because weekends are the only times I have away from LU. Before, I would work whenever I needed to work.

How significant is your wife, Becki, as a work partner?

All the public part of this is new to her like it is to me. She's really liking it. She has a lot of valuable opinions. She looks out for things I don't really pay attention to, like how publications look. She has helped Paula Johnson with the renovations of the (Carter Glass) Mansion. She has gotten close to a lot of the students. She gets on the Internet and reads what students are saying about Liberty. I base a lot of decisions on that. You've got to pay attention to what students are saying. She's a pretty good sounding board. She went to Christian schools and went to Liberty for a while, so she's familiar with Christian education. She cares about these students and how I perform in this job. That's more than you could ask for from a spouse.

What's the biggest challenge you have faced so far?

Public speaking. I had avoided that for years. It is something I've become more comfortable with. My biggest challenge was adapting to the public side of the job. If you haven't done something like that before, it's natural to be apprehensive about it. The students made it easy. They are a great group of kids. They are so eager to learn and for Liberty to succeed. They make it hard to fail. Another big challenge was keeping donors activated. We wondered if many of them were donating just because of their support for my father. The fact that so many have responded so well has been a great relief to many of us. Giving has been at record levels this whole year.

Do any accomplishments stand out in your mind?

The re-creation of the Liberty Journal has been a major accomplishment to me. The fact is it is now almost 100 percent devoted to the promotion, recruiting and fundraising for the university. It has become a tool to keep the donors activated. We're too big now to let the school ever slip into financial difficulties. Now, it takes us \$685,000 a day to operate every time the sun comes up. We've got to be fiscally responsible and build endowment. This year, \$20 to \$30 million in endowment has come in after our debt was paid off. The spirit on campus has got to be the other achievement. People who work here are always talking about how much they love Liberty. They talk about how great the student body is and how proud they are of them. The atmosphere on campus is about as positive as I've ever seen it. One donor told me that the fact that is occurring is an indication that God is really in it.

What do you have planned for the future?

This will be the first year that we have had to cut off fall enrollment early. We are thinking about slowing growth just enough to let us catch up by building the academic facilities we have put on

hold during the period of rapid growth we have had for the past six or seven years. As we continue to grow, we want to make sure that we retain academic excellence. We don't want to fall behind academically or spiritually. We are seriously looking at capping growth and using that breather to improve academic facilities. We've grown so fast a lot of departments are just bulging at the seams. We've built dorms. We've built food services. We've built classrooms. All the support facilities — like library space, labs and student centers for social activities — have lagged behind. We've been sprinting. We need to jog for a while.