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A Reflection on the Youth Aflame Reunion

December 01, 2009 | Nelson Keener

Nelson Keener, Class of 1976, attended the Youth Aflame Reunion from Sept. 10-13, 2009, along with many other alumni. Keener, who now lives in Pennsylvania, shares his thoughts with us on that special event.

My wife, Jeannie, and I had no idea what to expect on Thursday afternoon when we walked into the Liberty Youth Aflame alumni reception at the Kirkland Hotel. Would it be awkward with superficial pleasantries or guarded conversations?

It was none of the above.

Bam! (Thank you, Emeril.) It was more like spontaneous combustion ignited by seeing the faces of fellow classmates and co-workers who shared common experiences more than 30 years ago through our involvement with Youth Aflame, Treasure Island, Scaremare, LBC Choral, All God's Children, "I Love America" rallies and more.

At Friday's luncheon in the beautiful and cozy lodge at Liberty Mountain Snowflex Center and again Friday evening at a banquet, I knew this reunion was going to be much more than a warm-fuzzy get-together. The energy level of the conversations at each event was consistently enthusiastic. Our common bond was palpable.

I was intrigued. What was going on here? I mean, we're talkin' 35 years later.

When Dr. Falwell died in May 2007, I wrote an op-ed for my local newspaper about my experience working with him for eight years. I wrote it as much for myself as to publish it for others to read.

What astonished me while writing the column was how ardently I still felt about my experience with Jerry and Liberty University, even 22 years after I moved away from Lynchburg.

Did our shared experiences with Jerry Falwell and LBC in those early years make an indelible impression on us? Most definitely. We had the privilege and opportunity — possibly beyond our full comprehension — to be involved in launching what is now a strategic Christian university. It was an experience, an era, which will never recur, something to which most LU students since the '80s cannot relate.

Students don't usually go off to college expecting to have to build their own dorm rooms. Nonetheless, we laid carpet, hauled in bunk beds, set up kitchens, took long bus trips to Pittsburgh, performed school assemblies, and staged Jerry Falwell rallies and banquets across the country. Not to mention giving college students a vision for ministering to youth.

In retrospect, I believe the work we did was both critical and significant during those first five years under Gordon Luff's leadership (including Dean of Students) that laid a foundation and gave shape to the college. I know it shaped us as alumni.

It is obvious that as students we all shared a common call and a common mission. But I believe it was this working together — putting our shoulders to the wheel — that confirmed the call and mobilized the mission. It was “doing what had to be done,” whether we/Gordon had permission or not, that created a bond between and among us.

My sense is that this sentiment was the root of the excitement and energy we felt and expressed when we came together for the reunion. Thank you, Gordon, for your vision to do this. And thanks to Sheila Colclasure for making it happen.

P.S. Is it true that Gordon planned for the Friday banquet to run past midnight? I heard he really wanted to go to Texas Tavern at 2 a.m. for “a western and a bowl.”