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'MAMA LIBERTY'

Sharon Hartless makes strong mark on school

September 01, 2008 | Teresa Dunham

Photo caption: The tall shelves surrounding Vice President for Administration Sharon Hartless' desk are filled with memories — dozens of photographs of her grandchildren, pictures with the late Dr. Jerry Falwell and other dignitaries who have visited Liberty University, and a shiny unofficial nameplate that says “Mama Liberty.”

After more than 30 years of ministry, 59-year-old Hartless is the person students turn to when they need financial guidance or some motherly advice. Her office on Campus North is a virtual beacon for confused students — and they show up with all kinds of questions.

“A lot of the students are sent to me by the chancellor and by word of mouth. Some will come because different ones have said, ‘Mrs. Hartless can help you,’” she explained.

One of only three female vice presidents in the history of Liberty University, Hartless started as a part-time employee at Thomas Road Baptist Church and then worked at Liberty Christian Academy for 12 years. Steadily moving up the ranks, she took a job in the university’s marketing department in 1989 and was promoted to Assistant to the President in 1993, serving under two university presidents and later a chief operating officer before her official appointment as Vice President for Administration in 2006.

A decade earlier, Hartless was officially dubbed “Mama Liberty” by evangelist Billy Graham’s grandson, Roy Graham, while he was attending LU.

“Roy’s nickname for me was Mama Liberty because every time he came to see me I was working with somebody on problems and trying to take care of them,” Hartless recalled, adding that he later bought the “Mama Liberty” nameplate as a gift.

Like any good mama, Hartless can tell about the Liberty family history, starting with the first large event held on Liberty Mountain on July 4, 1976, to commemorate TRBC’s 20th anniversary and America’s 200th birthday.

“We all wore long, lightweight dresses, and we served as hostesses. We had dinner on the grounds,” she said.

She also remembers that some of the dorms weren’t ready when LU (then Liberty Baptist College) opened school on Liberty Mountain in August 1977. Dr. Falwell sent out a plea for TRBC members to host Liberty students in their basements — and Hartless and her husband, Wayne, who is now a grants administrator for LU, felt compelled to take in nine boys. Soon a man from the church was installing a bathroom in their basement, and the school was moving bunk beds into the Hartless home.

“The boys would call us Mom and Dad, and we weren’t a whole lot older than some of them. You weren’t supposed to have to feed them ... but at night I would be cooking dinner, and they would be there, and they’d go, ‘Boy, that smells like mama’s cooking.’ So we constantly had them eating with us,” she said.

The photographs on Hartless’ office shelves also reveal university history.

“One of my favorites is my picture with Dr. Falwell,” she said, pointing to the photo. “He could walk in a room, and he didn’t even have to say anything. You could feel his presence, and you knew he was there.”

Hartless remembers the days when Dr. Falwell prayed for God to carry the university out of debt. She also reminisces about watching Falwell’s sons, Jonathan and Jerry Jr., grow from little boys to the leaders they are today.

“It’s just really unbelievable,” she chuckled. “I’ve been here a long time, seen a lot of things happen, been through a lot of the good times and a lot of the bad times.”

Then Hartless pointed out the photos of her taken with dignitaries — Karl Rove, John McCain and many others — who have visited Liberty. She’d always shied away from getting her picture taken with anyone famous, but she said Dr. Falwell constantly told her, “Get up there. Get your picture taken!”

Hartless’ job isn’t always glamorous, though. Most days, she’s focused on another mama-style task — schedules and organization. She manages all areas related to general administration, makes sure the Office of University Scheduling provides a seamless master calendar for facility use, and coordinates commencement.

“We start working on commencement in January of every year,” she said. “It’s a lot of long hours ... but we make it.”

In addition to tailoring the commencement program, Hartless finds lodging for the commencement speaker and plans tight security. She works with honorary degree recipients, writing their biographies and ordering their diplomas, and serves as secretary for the school’s Board of Trustees, as well as the corporate secretary for LU. She also has the ongoing task of overseeing events sponsored by Chancellor Jerry Falwell Jr. or Executive Vice President-Chief Operating Officer Ronald Godwin.

“I often refer to Mrs. Hartless as the glue that holds the operations of the university together,” said Godwin, adding that she’s an invaluable resource because she has intimate knowledge of everything that happens at LU.

And Falwell Jr. said he often calls her the “corporate memory.”

Being Mama Liberty and the Corporate Memory and Glue is a demanding job, but she doesn’t plan on stopping anytime soon. Looking back, she said, it’s easy to see how God has guided her life for His glory.

“These past 32 years of service have been wonderful, and I have enjoyed every position I held. Liberty University is not just a job; it is a vital part of my life,” Hartless said.

Fast Facts

Name: Sharon J. Hartless

Title: Vice President for Administration, Liberty University

Age: 59

Hometown: Born in Lynchburg and raised in Madison Heights

Family: Her husband, Wayne Hartless, is a grants administrator for Liberty University. She has two grown sons and six grandchildren.

Her favorite thing: “My joy and delight these days are the grandkids.”

Church: Attends TRBC

Spiritual Advice: “It’s just keeping your daily walk with the Lord. I like to help others, but you need to make sure that you are doing what you’re supposed to do ... following direction from His Word.”