

UNIVERSITAS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

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FAREWELL, FATHER BIONDI

AS UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT
LAWRENCE BIONDI, SJ., RETIRES,
HE REFLECTS ON THE PAST AND
ON THE FUTURE.

BY LAURA GEISER

PHOTOGRAPH BY LAURA GEISER

UTAS: HOW DID YOU COME TO THE DECISION TO RETIRE? AND WHY IS THIS THE RIGHT TIME?

BIONDI: Down deep in my soul, I always knew I wouldn't be the SLU president forever. I'm 74 years old, and as I begin my 27th year as president of SLU, I feel it's the right time. I traveled to Southeast Asia this past March to visit our alumni, benefactors, prospective parents and to meet with students who are considering attending SLU. During that trip I had time to reflect on my personal and professional life at SLU and on the future.

When encountering this, I would advise my younger self not to get too distracted by this attitude because, in fact, most faculty and staff don't feel this way and do realize that they are accountable for their words and actions when teaching, conducting research and doing their jobs.

THERE'S NO INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR BEING A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT. HOW DID YOU LEARN TO DO IT?

I had a great predecessor, Father Tom Fitzgerald, S.J., who really primed SLU for the future. He offered me very good advice. I also had the good fortune to work with SLU's former president Father Paul Reinert, S.J., who had amazing institutional knowledge.

And, honestly, I learned a lot by just doing the job. Also important are self-reflection, prayer, instinct, openness to ideas and timely decision-making. Our excellent trustees, a strong executive staff of vice presidents, deans and managers, and other key leaders, helped set an example that I hope will continue.

WHAT'S THE BEST THING THAT'S HAPPENED DURING YOUR TENURE?

It has to be our increased enrollment. When I started, we had about 9,500 students; today we have almost 14,000 students with excellent academic credentials. We offer an outstanding Jesuit education, so the more people who can benefit from our mission and vision, the better. And I believe the more SLU alumni there are, the better our world will be. After all, aren't we forming, informing and transforming our students to be good citizens and effective leaders worldwide?

WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?

I'm most proud of SLU's emphasis on service. It has always been our tradition as part of our Jesuit mission to prepare men and women for others, but thanks to the tireless energy of our students and key leaders around campus, service now is truly embedded in the SLU experience. We have so many initiatives — like Casa de Salud, which offers health assistance to undocumented immigrants; the medical school's student-run Jesuit Health Resource Center, which provides medical care to needy residents of North St. Louis; and our legal clinics, which serve the region's home

less veterans of our armed forces and victims of domestic violence. So many others benefit our local community and our students, who learn so much from one another by helping others.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY AS PRESIDENT?

