

UNIVERSITAS

S A I N T L O U I S U N I V E R S I T Y

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FARE WELL, FATHER BIONDI

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

BY LAURA GEISER



On May 4, nearly 800 Saint Louis University alumni, supporters and community leaders gathered in Chaifetz Arena for the “25th Anniversary Gala: Celebrating Father Biondi’s Leadership.” The event raised approximately \$1.4 million for student scholarships and academic initiatives.

The guests knew they were there to celebrate the long tenure of University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J. But they didn’t know they were about to hear big news.

When Biondi took to the podium for his scheduled remarks, he made a surprise announcement — telling the crowd that he planned to retire from the presidency of Saint Louis University.

“Just as I helped lead SLU’s transformation when I arrived here more than 25 years ago, I know it is now time for the next transformation to begin,” he said. “And, so, with the blessing of our board of trustees, I have decided it is time for a transition in leadership for Saint Louis University — time for me to move on to the next phase of my life.”

Biondi has been named president emeritus, and he began a one-year sabbatical on Sept. 1. SLU Vice President and General Counsel William Kauffman was named interim president, serving for the academic year.

Biondi hasn’t said much publicly since deciding to retire. But in the following interview, conducted in late August, he reflects on his time at SLU and his thoughts on his future.

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.

It is now the right time because, while I still have excellent health and continue to have lots of energy, I am ready and willing to take on other challenges as God directs me. I firmly believe that in many obvious ways, SLU is well situated for the next chapter of presidential leadership.

WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR LEGACY WILL BE?

That’s for others to decide. But I do hope I can be remembered for my passion, love and commitment to Saint Louis University.

Someone recently showed me a long list of accomplishments here at SLU since I arrived in 1987, and I’m proud of all of those things, but I didn’t do any of them alone.

So I hope part of my legacy is that I led our SLU team to acknowledge and accept that we are a vibrant, vital academic institution with a distinctive Catholic and Jesuit mission. And that I saw how great SLU could be — and I did everything to ensure that SLU achieved its full potential.

I hope the next president will be chosen because he or she understands, appreciates, believes and is committed to promoting SLU’s mission and vision.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO ADDRESS THE INCIDENTS OF THE PAST YEAR?

I’ll admit it was a tough year. Some people may not like my direct and decisive leadership style, but no one who knows me well and who understands academic culture at an American university will doubt my commitment to Saint Louis University and to doing the right thing.

I believe in Saint Louis University and all it stands for. I believe in shared governance and accountability. Each member of the SLU community has a voice. SLU has been around since 1818, and is sure to last another 195 years. This place is bigger than its president and faculty. People have short memories and easily forget successes, but history will remember.

YOU WERE PRESIDENT MORE THAN 26 YEARS, WHICH IS A LONGER TERM THAN ANY PREVIOUS SLU PRESIDENT. DID YOU EXPECT TO BE HERE THAT LONG?

No! My predecessor had been here eight years, and the average tenure of a president of a private university is about five years. No one expects to have the good fortune of doing a good job for so long, especially a Jesuit, who goes where he is called.

But by being here so long, I’ve been able to see things through — including big dreams like our dramatic increase in faculty and staff, academic programs, schools and research funding — plus our arena and research center. Early in my presidency, I set some pretty ambitious goals for SLU, and it’s been a pleasure to work with a great team to see so many of those goals come to fruition — including everything from an increased enrollment of 14,000 students, to a winning men’s basketball team that routinely makes the NCAA Tournament, to a strong student retention rate of 88 percent, to more than \$51 million in annual research grants.

IF YOU COULD GO BACK TO THE DAY YOU BECAME PRESIDENT OF SLU IN 1987, WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUR 1987 SELF?

Be patient. Things don’t happen overnight. Also be persistent. SLU is a large educational enterprise, with lots of moving parts, so it’s easy for things to get lost. But if something really matters, be tenacious about making sure it’s achieved.

Some University employees, not many, have an attitude that seems to ask: “What has the administration done for me lately?”

FROM LEFT

Biondi at his desk in 1989.

Biondi greets First Lady Barbara Bush, who delivered SLU’s commencement address in 1990.

Biondi delivers the homily at an outdoor Mass on the day of his inauguration in September 1987.

26 Years of Progress

Highlights of the 26-year tenure of retiring University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J.

The successful completion of fundraising and capital campaigns totaling more than \$785 million.

The investment of an estimated \$850 million in improvements, enhancements and expansions.

An increase in the size of SLU’s Midtown campus from 113 acres with 62 buildings to 268 acres with 131 buildings.



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?

That 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. These efforts and so many others benefit our local community and benefit our students, who learn so much from one another by helping others.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY AS PRESIDENT?

There are too many to choose from! But I will say that I always enjoyed the meet-and-greet time right after our new student convocation every August. Our first-year Billikens and their families come down to the arena floor, and I had a chance to literally see the future of our University and to talk with our parents who have hopes and dreams for their children. It always energized me for the school year ahead.

IS THERE ANYTHING YOU'D DO DIFFERENTLY, IF GIVEN THE CHANCE?

No, I don't think that way. There's no way to go back in time and change anything, so why dwell on the past?

But I do believe that one should reflect on events, note what is right and on target, and forge ahead confidently. One also needs to correct mistakes and humbly acknowledge them, make appropriate decisions in light of those mistakes, and forge on.

WHAT WERE THE BEST DECISIONS YOU MADE AS PRESIDENT?

It always came down to people. The best decisions were always about hiring the right people to do the right job. I have worked with some dedicated vice presidents and deans who were just as passionate about SLU as I am, and they have been instrumental in ensuring SLU's success.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Biondi blesses the bounty from a campus food drive in 1994.

Biondi, his sister Anna Marie Pierotti and his mother, Albertina (seated), at the April 2006 ceremony honoring him as St. Louis' 2005 "Citizen of the Year."

Biondi (right, front) cuts the ribbon at the Chaifetz Arena dedication in April 2008. With him, from left, are Grand Center's Vince Schoemehl, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay (Law '80) and then-Chairman of SLU's Board of Trustees Barry Beracha. Billiken broadcaster Bob Ramsey is at the podium.

Biondi throwing candy to the crowd at the annual Golf Cart Parade during SLU's 2007 Homecoming.



I'm also very proud of some of the "risks" we have taken to move SLU forward, for example, establishing new schools, institutes and centers, relocating Parks College to St. Louis and expanding our Medical Center by constructing the Doisy Research Center, buying the Pevely Dairy property for future growth and adding the stadium and Health Sciences Education Union there. Those have proven to be good decisions in the long run. I think the same will be said of our new downtown law school.

YOU'VE WEATHERED SOME STORMS AS PRESIDENT OVER THE YEARS. HOW DID THAT AFFECT YOU AND SLU?

As I said earlier, it's never easy to face unfounded criticism, but I always think it made SLU and me stronger. For example, early in my tenure, people complained about all the green space we were converting from black asphalt and complained that we were buying vacant, derelict, dilapidated properties. Can you believe it? And could you imagine SLU any differently today?

New students come to campus and think SLU has always been like it is today. Their parents and grandparents can tell them that there was another era and remind the new students that they are lucky to attend a modern, urban university like SLU.

HAS THE AVERAGE SLU STUDENT CHANGED IN THE TIME YOU'VE BEEN PRESIDENT?

Students seem very different. They are all connected via their cell phones and social media, so it seems that they wouldn't have anything in common with the students I met when I arrived in 1987, but fundamentally they're the same at their very core. They are drawn to SLU for the same reasons that students were back then: They want to change the world. They have dreams. Many are passionate about how they can make a better life for themselves and for their family and friends. They understand quickly and most of them accept the fundamentals of a Jesuit university education.

HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE THE CAMPUS NOW VERSUS WHEN YOU BECAME PRESIDENT?

Simply said, I think it's more inviting. We've got green space, fountains, flowers and more spaces for study and quiet contemplation. It's also better defined. When I arrived, you could drive right by

An increase in the number of endowed chairs and professorships at the University from 16 to 67, drawing and retaining the nation's leading professors in their respective fields.

Construction of the \$81 million on-campus Chaifetz Arena in 2008. The 10,600-seat, multipurpose facility has dramatically enhanced the student experience and is home to SLU's basketball teams and hosts many concerts.



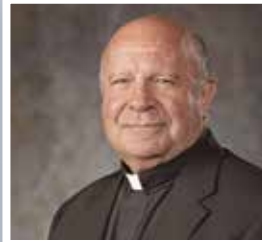
The decrease of the student-faculty ratio to 12-to-1 and reduction of the average class size to 24.4 students.

Completion of Scott Hall in downtown St. Louis, the Center for Global Citizenship (formerly the West Pine Gym), the Health Sciences Education Union, Medical Center Stadium, Hotel Ignacio, Water Tower Inn, John and Lucy Cook Hall, McDonnell Douglas Hall, Doisy College of Health Sciences, Dreiling-Marshall Hall, and the Henry Lay Center for Arts and Education in Louisiana, Mo., as well as the renovation and expansion of Busch Student Center and the renovation of Pius XII Memorial Library, among many other projects.

An increase of the University's endowment from \$93 million in 1987 to \$956 million.

Classification of SLU as a research institution by the Carnegie Foundation. The top-100 ranking of 35 undergraduate and graduate academic programs by *U.S News & World Report*.

The increase of full-time ranked faculty from 725 to 1,390.



UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J., responds to the classic "Proust Questionnaire."

SLU and not even know you had passed it. Today, SLU makes a big impression on metropolitan citizens and visitors.

I'm always reluctant to put too much emphasis on the physical changes to our campus because we've improved so much on the academic side as well, but the fact is that an attractive, safe and well-equipped campus is important. It helps recruit students. It helps retain students. And it visually reflects the outstanding institution that we are.

IT'S TRUE; SO MANY PEOPLE FOCUS ON THE PHYSICAL CHANGES YOU'VE MADE TO SLU'S CAMPUS. WHAT ELSE SHOULD THEY KNOW ABOUT ACCOMPLISHMENTS DURING YOUR TENURE?

They should know that it hasn't all been about beauty and buildings. Those things are easy to photograph and showcase in *Universitas*, but they're only part of the story.

Our most important accomplishments are not as easy to display in the alumni magazine. I'm thinking of our modern, high-tech education; our full-tuition Presidential Scholarships; our 67 endowed chairs and professorships; our increased research funding; our endowment, which is \$956 million; and our new, innovative academic programs, such as our Centers for Sustainability, for World Health and Medicine, and for Global Citizenship. These accomplishments and so many others are sometimes overlooked when people focus on physical improvements to campus.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE POSITION OF PRESIDENT NOW VERSUS WHEN YOU FIRST CAME TO SLU?

The SLU president is more a conductor of a symphony, trying to draw the best out of every player and instrument — and then making it blend in harmony. But sometimes even a tuba or drummer is off-key, and the conductor has to motivate the player or connect him or her to get back on the music score!

Also, we've grown, which means that it's more and more difficult to be involved in every decision here. When I started, I got involved in all aspects of SLU in order to listen, learn and act appropriately. As we grew, I had to trust and rely on our executive team to make the day-to-day decisions and bring me in when necessary. For someone like me who is very interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.

WHAT HAS BEEN THE GREATEST THING ABOUT YOUR SLU CAREER?

Without question, the people I've met. From our students, to community, business and civic leaders, to SLU alumni and benefactors, to my SLU colleagues, I am continually impressed by the SLU community. I came to St. Louis from Chicago in 1987 not knowing many people, and I quickly found not only acquaintances who became my friends, but a community of generous, friendly and passionate folks. When I am on my sabbatical, it's the people I will miss the most.

WHAT IS NEXT FOR YOU? IN YOUR SPEECH AT THE GALA YOU MENTIONED THE CALL OF FATHER GENERAL OF THE JESUITS, ADOLFO NICOLÁS, S.J., FOR SERVING THE POOR, UNEDUCATED AND MARGINALIZED IN OUR SOCIETY. IS THAT WHAT YOU'D LIKE TO DO?

I think I might like to spend time during my sabbatical serving the needy, improving the lives of society's most vulnerable people, but I'm not sure yet. I am discerning how best I can continue to be an instrument of our Lord as a Jesuit priest. Stay tuned.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS YOUR ROLE IN SLU'S TRANSITION?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

What historical figure do you most identify with? Ignatius Loyola

Which living person do you most admire? SLU alumnus John Foppe (the 2013 SLU Commencement speaker)

Who are your favorite fictional heroes? Tarzan, Superman and Dick Tracy

Who is your real-life hero? Archbishop Oscar Romero (who was assassinated in San Salvador in 1980)

What are your most treasured possessions? My two "sons," Iggy (9 years old) and Angelo (4 months old) — they're actually golden retrievers

When and where were you happiest? When I'm with friends who accept and love me — warts and all

What is your most obvious characteristic? My directness in communication

What is the trait you most deplore in yourself? Rashly judging others

What is the trait you most deplore in others? Manipulation of others for their own selfish, self-serving, self-absorbed rationalizations

What is your greatest extravagance? Maryland steamed crabs

What is your favorite journey? To southeast Asia — Thailand, Indonesia, South Korea and China

On what occasion do you lie — even a white lie? When I am too tired, and I am not up to accepting an invitation to an event

Which words or phrases do you most overuse? "You know"

If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be? To be more patient

What do you consider your greatest achievement? What SLU has become — a leading Catholic, Jesuit university

Where would you like to live? Some island where there are at least 1,000 people who need a Jesuit priest for ministry

What are the qualities you most admire in others? Sincerity, open-mindedness, generosity and compassion

What is it you most dislike? Liars

What do you value most in your friends? Honesty, trust and loyalty

How would you like to die? Right after I receive our Lord in the Eucharist

If you were to die and come back as a person or an animal, what do you think it would be? A golden retriever

What are your mottoes? "Say what you mean and mean what you say." "Cemeteries are filled with indispensable people."

Who has been the greatest influence on you? My many Jesuit brothers

WHAT GOALS DO YOU STILL HAVE, PERSONALLY?

Of course I love being a Jesuit priest, but I still dream about being either a Tuscan chef, a landscaper or an architect.

WHAT SHOULD THE BOARD BE LOOKING FOR IN THE NEXT SLU PRESIDENT?

They should try to find someone who understands, accepts and can contribute to the long established tradition of a Catholic, Jesuit education, and who values the unique impact, mission and vision of Saint Louis University in particular.

He or she should be a strong communicator who can reach out to all of SLU's constituencies — trustees, benefactors, students, faculty, staff, alumni and members of the civic, business and academic communities. Someone who can listen carefully, discern wisely, and lead and act courageously.

The next president must not be afraid to make tough decisions and to put SLU first and foremost.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO YOUR SUCCESSOR?

First, understand the dynamics of various constituencies. Then keep focused on what is best for SLU to continue helping the University to succeed. And don't blink at the naysayers.

Once you understand SLU's culture, accept it for what it is and then make the right decisions. Then you will fall deeply in love with SLU. Your passion for SLU will inform every decision you make and allow you to always see the big picture and make your dreams become reality.

HOW CAN ALUMNI CONTINUE TO SUPPORT SLU?

Just because I'm retiring, doesn't mean SLU is stopping. It's still evolving. This great University still needs the support of alumni and friends. Many of our students rely on their generosity for help with funding scholarships and other academic efforts, and that must continue while we move forward.

Plus, many of our alumni and friends are our best ambassadors — helping recruit students and sharing the good news about our University. We need their support to continue to be successful. ✦



The establishment of new academic, service, leadership and diversity scholarships. In 2012, SLU provided a record \$339 million in aid to students.

Completion of the \$82 million Edward A. Doisy Research Center in 2007. The state-of-the-art, LEED-certified facility offers SLU's world-class researchers a world-class home.

An increase in the total number of students from 9,869 to 13,981.

An increase of the average ACT score of entering freshmen from 22.7 in 1987 to 27.6 in 2013.

Recognition as a character-building college by *The Templeton Guide: Colleges That Encourage Character Development*.

The establishment of the Center for World Health and Medicine, an innovative initiative dedicated to addressing critical health concerns in developing nations.

The launch of the first Center for Sustainability at a Jesuit university.

The creation of the College for Public Health and Social Justice.

The expansion and enhancement of Saint Louis University's Madrid campus as the first foreign university to be recognized officially by Spain's Ministry of Higher Education.