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Charles William Donaldson

For nearly 40 years, Charles Donaldson has found ways to help University of Arkansas at Little Rock students find their paths, stay in school, improve their learning, and reach their potential.



By ERIC FRANCIS SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
 This article was published March 4, 2012 at 4:08 a.m.



Charles Donaldson, vice chancellor for educational, student services, and campus life at UALR.

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LITTLE ROCK — Hanging on the wall in the office of Charles Donaldson, vice chancellor for the Educational and Student Services Division of the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, is a five-point list that begins with this declaration: "UALR students are the most important people on the campus. Without them there would be no need for the institution."

That list, Donaldson explains, is his division's mantra, a set of priorities he came up with when he took the reins.

"I came into the position having a vision of what I thought we could do here at UALR," says Donaldson from his office within the expansive Donaghey Student Center at the heart of the campus. "I insisted we place this mantra in all of the offices that report to me, on the walls of the common areas as well as in the private offices. I actually tried to let it be the screensaver on all of our computers," he adds, then laughs, "but I lost that battle."

That lively, heartfelt laugh is heard often during a conversation with Donaldson. Tall and sharply dressed, with a neatly trimmed mustache and close-cropped hair that's more salt than pepper, he has a ready smile and a manner that sets you at ease as soon as you walk through his door — a manner that says it's not just students who are important to this man, it's everyone.

But on the UALR campus, it's definitely the students who warrant the highest priority.

With a background in counseling and secondary education, Donaldson came to UALR in 1973 with a desire to help students succeed — especially those who traditionally struggled in college, such as minorities, first-generation students and students with disabilities. But his biggest challenge in his first week on the job had nothing to do with the student body.

"The person who was over the entire area called me and a young white female colleague into his office," Donaldson recalls. "And he said to us, 'I just need you to know up front, I don't like blacks and I don't like women.'"

It was a stunning revelation, and for about 15 seconds they could only stand and stare at the man before Donaldson drew upon the confidence that had been instilled in him throughout his upbringing.

"I remember reaching down, grabbing her hand, and saying to him, 'That's your problem.' Then we turned and walked out of his office," Donaldson says. "We went our way, doing our jobs and doing

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them the best we possibly could.”

And how. During the following 39 years he has overseen programs for struggling students and developing leadership, encouraged the construction of on-campus housing, traveled to Rwanda to help institute a student exchange program, expanded the student center and opened a welcome center. And soon the university will open the Student Services One-Stop Center, a new building where all the departments under Donaldson’s purview will be consolidated so UALR students won’t have to trek between buildings on campus to find the help they need.

Donaldson’s student-oriented mindset has been a boon, said UALR Chancellor Joel Anderson, because he doesn’t have to worry about how things are going in the Educational and Student Services Division.

“I can give my attention completely to other areas of the university,” says Anderson, who joined the faculty at the same time as Donaldson. “I just can have total confidence he is on top of things in his division and he will lead and manage them very well.”

Anderson cited the implementation of oncampus housing as one example, noting that it “happened very smoothly and very effectively,” with tremendous positive feedback from the student body.

As for how Anderson and Donaldson get along on a personal level: “If I were going to be stranded on an island somewhere out in the ocean and had to choose a small number of friends to start a new community there, one of them would be Charles Donaldson,” he says. “He is a caring, responsible, resourceful human being.

“I’d just say there is no better.”

SEPARATE BUT EQUAL

Donaldson was born in 1947 in Newport and attended schools that were still being labeled as “separate but equal.” He said he never felt his education was lacking.

“I had awesome teachers at W.F. Branch High School,” he says. “My community was centered around church and school.”

Donaldson had two families while growing up in Newport: He and his mother, Mary Ratliffe, lived with his grandparents, Hillmon and Ruth Donaldson; and there was also his father, C.L. Borders, and stepmother, Doris Borders. While he attended segregated schools as a boy and was aware of civil rights struggles around the country, Donaldson said he felt protected in his family and hometown environment.

He also learned that a lot was expected of him.

“I was taught by my parents and grandparents and leaders in the community that you could achieve whatever you wanted to achieve if given the opportunity and you were willing to sacrifice and work for it,” he says. “And that has always been part of my existence.”

Not surprisingly, given those expectations, in 1965 he graduated first in his class.

“There was never a doubt about going to college,” Donaldson says. “The question would’ve been which college to go to and at that time ... Philander Smith College was on the horizon for me. I did not consider any other place; it was just understood that’s where I would attend college.”

What to study, though, was the question.

“The truth of the matter was, in that community [Newport], there were not that many African-American professionals,” he says. “They were primarily teachers, preachers or undertakers. And I didn’t really think I wanted to be any of those.”

While he gravitated toward being a minister, upon further reflection he realized he’d probably be assigned only to black churches instead of working with people from all races and walks of life, which he preferred. And he knew there were other ways to remain involved in the ministry without becoming a pastor.

So how did he make up his mind?

“I think I made my decision by watching a movie on television,” he says, smiling. “I don’t remember what the movie was, but I was enamored [of] the guy that was able to help people: a psychologist.”

Thus he earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology at Philander Smith, where he also served as the student government president and was a member of the Honor Society.

Donaldson has maintained a connection with the college over the years. He is a former trustee, served on the search committees that hired its last two presidents, Trudie Kibbe Reed and Walter Kimbrough, and sits on the committee that is now looking for its next president.

“In his long tenure at UALR in student affairs, he’s done a lot of things that are very impressive, particularly for a growing and thriving urban community university,” says Kimbrough, who will become president of Dillard University in Louisiana this summer. “We’re excited, because to have one of your alums that’s one of the key leaders in higher education in the state is impressive for us.”

Donaldson has also provided Kimbrough with valuable insight into what an earlier generation of Philander Smith graduates experienced and how he might recapture some of that excellence.

“For him to say, ‘Philander today isn’t the Philander I knew,’ that was one of the most powerful things he said to me,” Kimbrough says. “He was able to paint a picture in my mind of what the college was like when he was a student. I wanted to produce more graduates like him, from his era.”

And with some of his students going on to Ivy League schools and top seminaries, he feels like

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Philander is reaping the benefit of that experience and leadership.

SATURDAY MINI FEASTS

Along with education, family remains vitally important to Donaldson – and he has a pretty wide-ranging definition of the word.

“My family includes students here and students from Philander Smith,” he says with another smile, “and our friends know if you stop at the Donaldsons’ house at 4 o’clock on Saturday there is a mini-feast.”

Donaldson is the chef. A typical weekend meal will include two or three meats and a wide variety of vegetables. Special occasions like his daughter’s birthday in February call for a wider menu.

“Chateaubriand, asparagus wrapped in corned beef, garlic mashed potatoes in a wonderful shell, two cakes – Italian cream and lemon – other vegetables, and you gotta have the sweet tea,” he says. “And stuffed eggs, sliced tomatoes, and cucumbers.”

Sunday mornings mean church services followed by a family breakfast, another tradition Donaldson holds dear.

“I do that intentionally because I grew up in an environment where we always had three meals a day and that was family time,” he said. “That’s one time in the week that I cherish and try not to allow things to interfere with it. I feel blessed to have my kid and son-in-law here in the city so we can have this kind of relationship.”

Another family tradition is collecting antique American brilliant cut glass, which was made from the 1860s through the 1920s. He and his wife, Mable, have examples ranging from simple plates to elaborate lamps, and are always on the lookout for a new addition. Their daughter Andrea Barnes collects, too, a fact he attributes to her taking part in their antique store expeditions when she was young.

“We’ve been collecting for, gosh, years. I can’t remember not collecting,” Donaldson said. “It allows me and my wife to do lots of things together. We’re actually members of the national American Cut Glass Association, we attend the national meetings, we take the classes, we study the art. The fascination is determining when the piece was made and who cut it.”

MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKING

Finding hidden treasures in out-of-the-way antique shops isn’t much different from what Donaldson does in his day job, which requires finding the often hidden triggers that will motivate college students. That was especially so with many of the young black men who came to UALR, where data showed their retention and graduation rates were terrible.

“I can recall calling in two of my associates, who also happened to be African-American males – Logan Hampton and Darryl Mc-Gehee – and I said to them, ‘I want to do something for these students, and I want you to help design a program that will do just that,’” he says. “They accepted that challenge and it’s been history since.”

What they came up with was the African American Male Initiative, a program that mentors those students and monitors their progress to make sure they’re succeeding at UALR.

“The program focuses on creating an environment where the students understand that they matter,” he says. “My field teaches me that if students are engaged in the community, they have a better opportunity to succeed.”

With a signed contract and grade point requirements to participate, monthly meetings and an annual conference, the initiative has helped improve performance among black men on campus. What’s more, Donaldson’s team also realized that black women weren’t doing much better than their male counterparts at UALR, so they created a mirror program, Ladies Who Launch, for them.

“We’re doing everything that we feel we need to do to try to give the student that extra push to succeed,” he says. “And even with all of this, it’s still not where I want it to be. My students would tell me, ‘Your expectations are too high,’ and I continue to say to them, ‘You’re better than this; you can reach the highest goals you set.’”

Donaldson is also enthusiastic about the Rwandan Scholars Program, which brings students from the tiny African nation (just one-fifth the area of Arkansas) to study at UALR, Hendrix, and other colleges and universities throughout the United States. Supported in part by the Rwandan government and in part by scholarships at the participating schools, the students are to complete a four-year degree, then return to their homeland, with a goal of helping improve its infrastructure and social systems for a better future. The program started four years ago, and UALR’s first group of Rwandan students will graduate in May.

“I can’t say enough about them. They’re absolutely wonderful,” says Donaldson, who likes to visit with the Rwandans when they have lunch in the Donaghey Student Center. “They’re majoring in science, engineering, mechanical engineering. I think the average grade point for this first group is roughly 3.75 and they’re taking 15, 18, 20 hours per semester.”

What’s more, some of them also hold down jobs and are sending money back to their families. And many of the students were children during the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

“The experience of me being there, learning about their history, learning about the genocide, it was a life-changing experience,” Donaldson says. “I found the people to be extremely generous and caring ... All of [the students] want to go back home and make a difference in their country.”

So profound was the impression Rwanda made upon Donaldson that he very much wanted to return with this year’s team to help interview candidates and select the next batch of 10 students.

But someone threw him a curve ball – namely the UALR Alumni Association, which is honoring

Donaldson for his many contributions to the university at the association's annual scholarship fundraiser. It's on March 15 – which happens to coincide with the Rwandan trip.

"It's a real tossup," Donaldson says with a demure smile and a little laugh. "There's something inside me that says, 'Go to Rwanda,' because I tend to be a private person and don't like the attention."

Really, it's more about his humble nature than anything else. While Donaldson has always tried to live up to the expectations ingrained in him during childhood – the idea that if just given an opportunity, he would do everything he could to make the most of it – taking credit for such excellence was never really part of the game plan.

"I do what I do because I feel it's right and it's a mission for me and I don't need recognition for it," Donaldson says. "However, I appreciate those who are willing to step up and provide recognition. I am grateful for it. It's unneeded, but I'm grateful."

The UALR Alumni Association's "Taste of Argentina" event will be held at 6 p.m. March 15 at the Bailey Alumni Center, UALR. Tickets are \$50 per person and can be bought online or by calling (501) 683-7208.

SELF PORTRAIT

Charles Donaldson

DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH March 8, 1947, Newport

MY FAVORITE CHILDHOOD TOY I enjoyed books. A toy, I guess, would be my bicycle.

THE MAJOR MOST STUDENTS SHOULD CONSIDER I would never give an answer to that because I think it's an individual choice and they should select an area that brings them happiness.

DO YOU COOK OR CLEAN THE DISHES? I cook. I clean. I do windows and I do floors.

A FAVORITE BAND OR MUSIC? I like all music, classical in particular. Probably one of my favorites is Pachelbel's Canon in D major.

MY PET PEEVE IS Technology ... I feel we're losing some of the human touch.

PEOPLE WOULD NEVER SUSPECT THAT I am an introvert.

MY DREAM VACATION IS Once I retire we plan to go to Malaysia, and I would really like to take a trip around the world.

DOGS OR CATS? Neither. Allergies.

I'M PROUD OF The Student Services One-Stop Center at UALR.

ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP Driven.

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