



A Servant's Heart

AFTER 31 YEARS OF UA SERVICE, JUDY BONNER BECOMES
THE FIRST WOMAN TO LEAD THE CAPSTONE.

by Chris Bryant

As a child, Dr. Judy Bonner often found newspaper clippings on her bedtime pillow detailing the professional accomplishments of women. Her dad placed them there, she recently recalled, exposing her to professional, female role models, an otherwise rare encounter in 1950s Camden, a three-stoplight Alabama town.

"Growing up in a poor, rural county, I had a father who wanted me to see women lawyers, doctors and judges," Bonner said. "Every summer when we went to Pensacola [Fla.] for our family vacation, my father drove a little out of the way in order to go through Monroeville [Ala.] and by the law office of Alice Lee." Alice is a sister of UA alumna Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Young women today, of course, don't

have to look to out-of-the-way locations to find professional role models. One place they can be found is in the corner suite on the second floor of UA's Rose Administration Building, the office home of Bonner, UA's 28th president and the first woman to serve in that role.

Named to the position on Nov. 1, 2012, Bonner, 65, said she had given no thought to the historical precedent set with her selection until media members mentioned it. "If my role as president can inspire young ladies to work hard and dream bigger, I am truly humbled and honored," she said.

Dr. Mark Nelson, vice president for student affairs and a vice provost, as well as a colleague of Bonner's for more than two decades, said the mark is noteworthy. "She fits the role of a president," Nelson said. "On a day-to-day

basis, [the precedent] is not something that we may think about, but, for this particular moment in history, I think it's powerful and significant and good for our university."

Talk with others around campus, and you'll hear that Bonner's work ethic, attention to detail and love for the institution where she's worked for 31 years are also noteworthy—bordering, perhaps, on legendary.

Nelson concurs. "There are many qualities that make her ideal as president," he said. "At the top of the list are her care and concern for students—their success and well-being—and also her love and passion for The University of Alabama. I don't know of anyone who has such a passion for this institution."

The vice president said Bonner also possesses a passion for information. He

remembers the thud of a large, somewhat complex document purporting to detail the many advantages a software program would bring to campus if the institution's leadership would agree to purchase and implement it. It was offered to Nelson as background in the days prior to a presentation from the software's vendor. "I remember thinking, 'I don't have time to get through this document.'"

He shared a copy with then-Provost Bonner. "Dr. Bonner walked into this meeting, and it was full of tabs," Nelson said. "She had absorbed the information in that document, and she was able to have a conversation with them that was so well-informed that my mouth dropped to the floor."

Similar scenes have repeated themselves many times over, he said. "She is relentless in the pursuit of information. I don't know how she does it. I really do not. She ensures that she is fully informed on issues. I know she must be a voracious reader, and she has a memory that is second to none. She

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can recall details from conversations that we have had. Often when we meet, she does not have to take notes, and the follow-up is thorough. It is certainly a skill that I would like to have."

Bonner, '69, MS '73, has honed her skills in a variety of positions at UA, beginning as head of the department of human nutrition and hospitality management in 1981. She served as dean of the College of Human Environmental Sciences from 1989 to 2003 and has had stints as special assistant to the president and assistant academic vice president.

The two-time UA graduate, who also holds a doctorate in human nutrition from The Ohio State University, was promoted to the University's executive vice president and provost on April 1, 2006, after serving as provost and

vice president for academic affairs since March 2003. Earlier in her career, she held faculty positions at The University of Alabama at Birmingham and Ohio State.

She was named UA's interim president in March 2012 after then-UA President Robert E. Witt was selected as chancellor of the UA system. The board of trustees of the UA System selected Bonner as president after Dr. Guy Bailey stepped down from the position. Bailey had served for about two months, citing concerns over his wife's health in his resignation.

Bonner said she never set the presidency as a career goal. "I have enjoyed each position I have held, and never really wanted a different job," she explained. "Some faculty have career maps and aspire to climb the administrative ladder. My aspiration was simply to do the very best job I could with the responsibilities that I had at the time."

Her aspirations for the institution include building on the progress made during the last decade. "We must continue to recruit and retain the best and brightest students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels," she said.

Increasing retention and graduation rates for undergraduates is a necessary and achievable goal, she said, particularly given the high caliber of students UA is attracting. Recruiting and retaining top-notch faculty and staff and providing them and students with the necessary infrastructure to support learning and discovery are other aims.

Bonner said she's cognizant of the

Ridgeway and Bennett Britt, visitors to the president's office in the Rose Administration Building, showed off crayon drawings they made for her.



President Judy Bonner in a discussion with students

support provided by the state and that she expects the institution to return in-kind. "We need to give back to the state by sharing the expertise of our faculty and staff in ways that support economic development."

Challenges, Bonner said, include obtaining the resources necessary to continue the trajectory of the institution's rapid progress of the last 10 years. "We need to ensure that we are strategic and that we are constantly evaluating all that we do in order to find better ways of increasing our efficiency and effectiveness without unnecessarily increasing our costs."

Bonner, who worked alongside Witt from his first week on the job, pointed out that UA is different in many ways from when the two first paired in March 2003. "Our student body, our faculty, our staff and our facilities have steadily grown," she said. "More importantly,

each has steadily grown with quality. At a time when higher education and our entire nation experienced the worst economic downturn of my lifetime, The University of Alabama has continued its upward trajectory on all fronts.

"The University of Alabama is the envy of higher education, nationally," Bonner said.

Even after the recession intensified in 2008, the Capstone's momentum continued, she noted. "Colleges and universities across the nation have been faced with the daunting task of identifying programs to close and positions to eliminate. Faculty and staff at other universities have been faced with furloughs as a way of balancing the budget. We have simply not missed a beat. Now, I have the opportunity to lead an institution that has experienced extraordinary success and is positioned to continue that success."

Bonner herself did not miss a beat when it came to choosing a college out of high school. "I did not visit a variety of colleges looking for the right one,"

she said. "I simply knew that the Capstone was the right university for me."

Intending to major in math, she took an introductory nutrition course as an elective. "The professor was outstanding," Bonner said. "She helped me understand the role that nutrition plays in both promoting health and wellness and in treating various diseases."

Bonner was hooked on a new major, going on to earn three nutrition-related degrees and emphasizing pediatric nutrition in her research.

Her father, Jo Robins Bonner, an attorney and probate judge, and mother Jean, a nurse who worked in her husband's law office while Judy was a child, both emphasized education to their children. "For my parents, everything revolved around their three children," Bonner said. "We were an extremely close family. Church played a central role in our daily lives."

The middle child and only daughter, Judy is 13 years older than her brother, Jo, who is serving his sixth term as a U.S. representative, and two years younger



The announcement of Bonner's presidency was covered by media from across the state.

than her brother, Jimmy, '67, who is retired from Phifer Inc., headquartered in Tuscaloosa, and now lives back in Camden, in rural Wilcox County.

Jo Bonner, '82, remembers visiting his big sister during her days as a UA student. He recalls football games on campus, surprise Matchbox car gifts from her, and an "elephant ride" outside a Five and Dime store in Alberta City that frequently gobbled his sister's dimes for his benefit.

"She spoiled me rotten, as she has now done my children," Jo said. "She has one of the most generous hearts of anyone I know—not just in terms of a gift, but of the love that she gives. I think one of the most telling impacts of that is her love of The University of Alabama. She truly has put her heart and soul in and dedicated her life to The University of Alabama. She has had opportunities to go elsewhere, professionally, and has always turned

them down because, I think, she feels a loyalty and fidelity to The University of Alabama that are somewhat uncommon."

A doting aunt, Judy Bonner said Jo's children feel more like her grandchildren, and she remains "very close" with both brothers. "One of the most important things to me is family," Bonner said.

And, included in that family, she said, is her four-legged child, Maggie, a Cavalier King Charles Spaniel that Bonner describes as beautiful. "She is always excited to see me."

High-caliber high school students are increasingly excited to see UA. The Capstone's enrollment is 33,602 students, up from 19,633 in 2002. The fall's freshman class encompassed a record 6,397 students, the largest and most academically talented in the University's history. It includes 241 National Merit Scholars, ranking first among public institutions and fourth among all universities.

One in four freshmen is enrolled in the Honors College, and 1,725 of them

had high school grade point averages of 4.0 or higher. The class's average ACT score was 25.6.

Bonner said one of the most striking changes between the campus she attended and the one she now leads is student housing. Six residential communities have opened on campus just since 2003, with a seventh scheduled for August 2014. "When Presidential II



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is complete," Bonner said, "we will have invested \$289 million in new residential communities and opened 1.9 million square feet of residential communities with more than 5,000 beds."

Bonner said two of the people who have influenced her the most, professionally, are Witt and former UA President Roger Sayers. "Dr. Witt is a transformational leader. I learned from him the importance of staying focused and attending to every detail, regardless of how small that detail is."

From Sayers, Bonner said she learned the "importance of playing the game before the kick-off. Dr. Sayers was a

decisive leader, but he always took the time to analyze thoroughly the consequences of any decision before making it. Learning from him how to do that has served me well as an administrator."

And speaking of kick-offs and leaders, Bonner said she's appreciative of the excitement and visibility the Crimson Tide sports programs bring to campus. "Athletics has been described as the front porch to The University of Alabama," she said.

Maggie, Bonner's pet spaniel, is reminiscent of UA President George Denny's collie, Bonnie, who often accompanied him to his office in Manly Hall. Bonnie is shown relaxing under his desk in the 1915 photo at left, from The University of Alabama: A Pictorial History.

"The success enjoyed by our Department of Intercollegiate Athletics has been astonishing." She cited the consecutive national championships in gymnastics and national championships in women's softball, women's golf, and three out of the past four years in football.

"Our coaches are preparing our student athletes to be champions on the field and in the classroom," Bonner said. "They are preparing leaders. Coach Mal Moore was just recognized nationally as the Athletics Director of the Year. Without question, he has assembled the finest coaching staff in America."

Asked, less than three months into

her tenure, about the demands placed on the University's president, Bonner said thus far there haven't been any surprises. "I am used to the long hours," she said. "I know the issues. I have been enormously gratified by the support for the University from our alumni and public leaders, but I knew about their support. We are very fortunate to have the most loyal alumni of any university in the nation."

Nelson said UA is fortunate to have someone with Bonner's talents and approach to the presidency. "Clearly, in the role of provost, and now in the role of president, she is humble, and she certainly has a servant's heart," he said. "I think that shines through in her leadership and in her interactions with students and alumni."

Jo Bonner said his thoughts quickly turned to his deceased parents when learning of his sister's selection as UA's president. "I couldn't help but think

about how proud my mother and father would be that their little girl—20 years and a few days after my mother passed away—would be given this tremendous opportunity to serve the University as president. I couldn't help but think they would be, and they are, extremely proud for her and of her in having this chance to cap off what has been a remarkable career."

And somewhere, some other little girl may be capping off her bedtime routine while a clipping about UA's new president awaits discovery on her pillow. ■

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