

Make a *promise* that lasts more than a lifetime.



SOUTHERN FARM BUREAU LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY
www.sfbli.com

Your Friends for Life. FARM BUREAU INSURANCE

Mississippi Christian Living

DON'T MISS EDITOR'S LETTER — God is with us in the dark

Home > Columns > Dr. Roger Parrott—Belhaven University's Creative Leader

Dr. Roger Parrott—Belhaven University's Creative Leader

By mcl on April 1, 2017

SHARE TWEET SHARE SHARE 0 COMMENTS

By Marilyn Tinnin



Dr. Roger Parrott Belhaven University's Creative Leader

Dr. Roger Parrott, completing his 22nd year as President of Belhaven University, sat comfortably in his rocking chair in the middle of his beautifully appointed office with its vintage paneling, copper ceiling tiles, his grandfather's desk, and an antique curio cabinet displaying personal memorabilia—each piece with a story of its own. There is something oh-so-1930s era about the setting. It is warm and welcoming, and at the same time inspires a certain sense of healthy respect for the man who

spends untold hours here. I cannot imagine that a 2017 university student would see it any other way.

It was a sunny but chilly afternoon a few weeks ago when I sat down with Dr. Parrott. The azaleas were already in full bloom; the enormous live oaks cast shadows over the plush carpet of green, and there were jean-clad students with backpacks scurrying in every direction across the campus. The typical scene looked like something out of a Norman Rockwell sketch.



© Stegall Imagery

Since 1995 when Dr. Parrott took the helm of Belhaven College in what looked like its dying days, he has been intentional in every detail to guide a restoration and reinvention of this historic institution. The first impression, the outward beauty of the campus—and believe me, it is beautiful—is symbolic of its proud legacy, its respect for the past, and an almost palpable fresh enthusiasm for innovation and 21st Century originality.

Maybe that atmosphere of fresh enthusiasm is due in part to the fact that Belhaven University is one of only 33 universities in the country accredited in all four areas of the arts—visual arts, theatre, music, and dance. The creative synergy of so many serious artistic souls does influence the campus culture in a positive sense.

Belhaven's stellar achievements in the Arts are something Parrott describes as "...pretty remarkable, really. Our philosophy is that the arts are great tools of communication. Who has the ability to shape culture more than the arts? Not a politician, not a preacher, not a business leader. We want to prepare really great artists who can compete in any arena and in any format. The great music, the great art, came out of the church at first." He sees the Arts as a tremendous platform and a place where Christians have significant opportunities for influence.

Dr. Parrott often uses the metaphor of the sailboat to explain the ongoing evolution of Belhaven's renewal. The sailboat is not a motorboat. A motorboat institution propels itself in a self-determined direction by its own power. The sailboat has to patiently monitor the wind God sends and go faithfully in that direction. Such an analogy explains better than almost anything why Belhaven continues to grow and prosper in today's world where higher education across the country—at least if you read the headlines—appears to be in a constant state of angry revolt.

A third generation college president, Dr. Parrott insists he never set out to follow in his father or grandfather's footsteps. "I guess I learned the ethos of the idea from being around my dad, but how to do it, I really didn't." He adds that things in today's world of higher education are so incredibly different and in such a state of constant change that his challenges are worlds removed from those his father and grandfather faced.



Dr. Parrott's grandfather, also a college president, behind the same desk Dr. Parrott uses today.

At His Core

The most valuable piece of advice his dad gave him about leading a university was this: Learn to live with ambiguity. Heeding that seemingly odd counsel has proved to be one of the secrets to Belhaven's success and in keeping with the idea of waiting for the "wind of God" to blow. As Dr. Parrott explains, "We don't do 25-year plans here, although we plan very well what we know never knowing where that might lead," he says.

The never knowing where something might lead is not the same as failing to look ahead. In fact, Dr. Bill Penn, who has been a part of Belhaven's faculty for 35 years, says that Dr. Parrott's ability as a "long-run decision maker" is one of his great strengths. "His futuristic view of issues is so important. He seems to be always thinking ahead although he knows that Belhaven's future is ultimately in God's hands." At the same time, says Dr. Penn, his leadership style is very much one of a servant. Faculty and staff find his door is always open, and he is more than willing to listen to their ideas and concerns.

Roger Parrott, as a father himself, takes very seriously his responsibility to the students who choose to come to the institution he leads. He believes with his whole heart that, "God handpicks the students who choose Belhaven. If God handpicks them, we better do our best to give them everything we can give them to be successful in the job, the family, and everywhere."



A familiar Belhaven campus sight—Dr. Parrott and students!

He has a particular empathy for the college freshman that is unsure about so many things at this particular crossroads of life. Dr. Parrott is so interested in seeing them succeed that when he speaks to prospective students, he gives them his cell phone number and encourages them to call him—even at home—if he can help with a situation.

This university president has not forgotten what it was like to be a college student. It is hard to imagine this perfectly put together academic being a non-serious student, but he hints that he was. "I never got serious about academics until well into my college years," he says. "I started out in history just because I had to choose a major. I ended up in psychology in undergrad. I played football, soccer, and tennis, but my wife who is a big time academic had a great influence on me." He says a lightbulb gradually started to come on as he began pursuing the things that seemed to come easily to him. His personal experience has made him a great and compassionate mentor to students who appear on the college campus and struggle to find their specific gifts. He sees among the bullet points on his self-appointed job description: "Help students find the light switch!"

Committed to The Longview

In 2009, Dr. Parrott wrote a book on leadership. *The Longview* is a concise "how-to" guide that gives invaluable and practical advice for leaders whether one's responsibilities are to students on a college campus or employees in a business or the family members who sit around one's personal dinner table. The most revealing thing about Parrott's words is that his vision, actions, and successful results all flow from his heart commitment to Christ and the high priority of representing him well in the world. Humility marks the man.

He confides that the second big piece of advice his father once gave him was, "Always assume that someone knows who you are." The thought that he is representing Belhaven University 24/7 is

never forgotten even in those annoying situations such as a last minute flight cancellation or a careless waiter who can't get an order right. "To me, it becomes a spiritual issue, too," he says. "I represent the university and the university represents Christ, so I've always got to represent Christ in how I interface with anybody."



Fly-fishing was a longtime hobby, but today he fishes the coastal Gulf waters.

Another insight into Dr. Parrott's philosophy of leadership and ministry involves the way he responds to interruptions. He says, "If you model the life of Jesus, his ministry was mostly interruptions. And, to me, that is a model for ministry. We all have to-do lists. We've all got things we need to get done, but to realize the interruptions are where the real ministry is most likely to be—if you get that idea engrained—then the interruptions become less disruptive." And certainly less stressful!

Roger Parrott's long view is closely tied to his worldview and a desire to build whatever he builds on values that endure.

In the uncertain days of 1995 when Parrott arrived at Belhaven, enrollment had shrunk to less than 1,000 students. The headhunter who contacted him initially about the position was far from effusive in his praise of the distressed institution.

Dr. Parrott laughs when he recalls asking what the campus was like. The headhunter hesitated, sighed, and then replied, "Well, it sags."

The man who was even then adept at considering the long view took a deeper look. He discovered that about 25 years earlier, during the social upheaval of the 1970s, the board of trustees had made three revolutionary decisions regarding the future. The first was to return Belhaven to its evangelical roots. The second was to raise the academic standards, and the third was to be purposeful about serving students of color. Dr. Parrott says that any one of those transitions would have been difficult, but choosing to do all three at once, "Just about killed the place."



Diversity of the student body was once intentional. Now it is just natural.

"But I felt like the right bones were here of mission, location and commitment to serve Mississippi." The school had been focused on simply trying to survive for a while. The evidence was apparent everywhere from the crumbling buildings to the non-functioning fountain that stood abandoned at the main entrance to campus.

Dr. Parrott realized he would not be able to fix everything overnight, but he knew there was great potential. There were devoted educators here, people who very much wanted to see the school redeemed and who believed strongly in the value of Christian higher education.

He was barely past 40, young enough to have limitless energy, which he was ready to put to good use immediately! However, even in those first days, Dr. Parrott was about the sailboat, always paying close attention to catching the wind of God and steering in that direction, rather than assuming he knew best and following his own design.

Although he is a “big picture” leader who senses that “wind of God” and is able to attract gifted teams to help move in that direction, he admits that he is also interested in details “because they matter.” He uses the metaphor of “frayed edges,” a little neglect and inattention to mission and operation that can over time cause an institution to veer far from its founding principles.



It is part of his stewardship and his sense of calling to give great attention to Belhaven’s edges.

The Mission Continues

A survey conducted by the American Council on Education several years ago revealed that college presidents serve an average of 8.5 years on the same campus. Dr. Parrott’s 22 years and continued leadership is definitely not average.

“I stay here,” he says, “because this place is unique from all else I see going on in higher education where there is not enough mission drive, not enough caring for students, not enough ‘Let’s get the best value out of our money, let’s make an impact for the kingdom.’”

There is also vibrant creativity, not just among the student body, but in the minds of the faculty and the manner in which they approach a new idea. A few years ago several faculty members and Dr. Parrott began to collaborate on a Masters of Ministry degree program. Their own survey among a lot of American leaders of different ministries revealed 120 characteristics a well-qualified administrator should possess. Consequently, the entire curriculum was written to specifically teach to those outcomes.



Belhaven University dance department’s national accreditation, experienced faculty, biblical worldview, and beautiful facilities set it apart.

In August, Dr. Wallace Henley, a prolific author, former White House aide, award-winning journalist and pastor, will join the faculty full time to initiate that degree. This scenario of discovering a need and finding a way to meet it is just one example among many in recent years where the “wind of God” empowered an attentive and obedient crew. Together they continue to accomplish something that is both positive for God’s kingdom and meaningful in the lives of Belhaven’s students.

That kind of shared vision and common motivation mean that something fresh and new is always on

the horizon there. When the online degree program began, it was a very new concept barely beyond the incubation stage. Belhaven moved to the forefront in delivery and quality of this genre by considering the needs of the adult students who were trying to manage family and work responsibilities while going back to school.

The university's first doctoral program will launch in May. It is not surprising that it will be a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership. Plans are already on the drawing board for a second doctoral program focused on higher-education administration. According to Dr. Parrott, they want to be sure they are ready when that "wind of God" lets them know the time is right to launch that one as well.

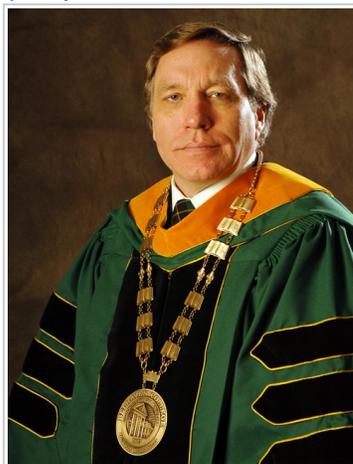


Belhaven's Visual Art Department is an accredited institutional member of the National Association of Schools of Art and Design.

In today's culture that gives little credibility to the idea of biblical Truth or the unchanging nature of the Almighty God, higher education, in general, across the country seems to be a chaotic jumbled puzzle of differing social agendas and closed minds. Not so at Belhaven University where the administration and the faculty share a common goal and a similar calling as to their role on this university campus.

What does a successful university do for its students, and in looking down the road, what do its graduates do for a community and a culture? Are they prepared to take the best of the past and forge new paths in the future? That seems to be an intentional priority here.

As Dr. Parrott says, "A successful university transforms students' lives enough that they can have the strength to adjust and respond in a Christ-honoring way to a world that is changing rapidly. That does not just mean getting the job, not just competing in the marketplace, not just building character, not just being a Christian, although it's all of those together. The work we do here is a lot of seed planting. Our job is to work with the students God sends us—to do the seed planting and let God do the work."



Despite the numerous awards and accolades Belhaven has garnered over the last two decades of its "reinvention," Dr. Parrott modestly says, "What we care most about, those awards don't measure."

RELATED POSTS



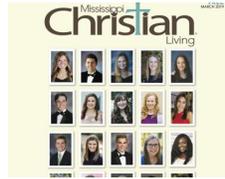
EDITOR'S LETTER — God Is With Us In The Dark



Christy Henderson On Depression, Mental Health And Her Ultimate Hope



EDITOR'S LETTER — Grateful For New Neighbors — And For Leaders



2019 Christian Leaders Of The Future

Contact Us

MISSISSIPPI CHRISTIAN LIVING

573 Hwy. 51 Suite C
Ridgeland, MS 39157
Phone: 601.790.9076
Fax: 601.790.9078
Email: katie@mschristianliving.com

SUBMIT A STORY IDEA

To submit a story idea please send a brief summary of 200 words and your contact information to the **editor**. Please put "Story Idea" in the subject line of your email and only include the basic components in the email.

SUBSCRIBE TO *MISSISSIPPI CHRISTIAN LIVING*

Get a 1-year subscription for just \$22 sent to your door (or as a gift). [Subscribe here!](#)