

Wayland president emphasizes working together

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PLAINVIEW—“Let’s clean up the kitchen so we can start cooking,” said Wayland Baptist University President Donna Hedgepath, quoting her grandmother as she addressed the Wayland family during Convocation 2024.

“We can and we will accomplish great things together,” the 14th president of the university said.

Referencing Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and the strength of a cord with three strands, she continued, “With God as that third strand, nothing is impossible.”

Noting her theme, the new president said, “I want to share that success with you, my new Wayland family,” because we are “Better Together.”

“This academic year, you can expect updated technology in all the computer labs and most of the classrooms on the Plainview campus,” she said. “In addition, Wayland has received a generous donation to fully equip and update our media arts programs. This upgrade will make us competitive with any other programs in this area.”

She noted her husband, Pete, is taking the lead on remodeling Pete’s Place, an underutilized patio area originally designed as a student hang out.

“It’s so beautiful, it has so much potential, and we know that the students will love using it if we really make it a great place.”

She said utilitarian updates such as heating and cooling systems, plumbing, roofing and furniture replacement are “occurring as we speak. God is

providing and we are taking care of business. The plan is to start a renewal of beauty.”

Hedgepath said Wayland will begin the development of a new strategic plan this year, “a plan that hits the big dreams, as well as continued needs for facilities, technology and programs.”

She expressed a need to focus on increasing retention and graduation rates: “That huge group of freshmen who stood earlier, just made my heart race. I want them all to stay. I want you to come back. I want you to graduate.”

She said her vision is on “increasing the reach of our mission—ways to elevate Wayland in a way that continues to glorify God in every endeavor we pursue.”

Sharing her background

The president’s remarks were often personal.

“Once you get to know us, you will see quickly that my husband and I are very different,” she said. “We have different interests and experiences. We have a very strong, loving marriage that doesn’t focus on the differences but on what we do have in common—faith, family and food.

“Those are important, but at the center it has always been Jesus. We plan and hope to share more of our life journeys and testimonies over the coming years, and I look forward to hearing about yours as well.”

Hedgepath said getting to this point in her life “did not magically happen, nor was it easy.”

“As the daughter of parents from far western Kentucky, I grew up on the Mississippi River. I mean, right on the river. We were called river rats,” she

said.

“I guess you could say I was raised right, meaning my parents expected me to listen, show respect, do my part, go to church, make good grades in school, stay out of trouble, choose a good friend group, go to college, and so on.

“I was introduced to Jesus by my parents and through my church from Day 1. I learned early that true joy comes from my relationship with Christ.”

“We didn’t have a lot of material things,” she confided. “I guess you could say we were socio-economically challenged, but the beauty was that I didn’t really know it. We did not have what you would call a nice home, but I thought it was perfect.

“We took pride in what we did have. I always felt it was my responsibility to find my own way. I witnessed my mom and dad work so hard to make ends meet, something I carry with me to this day. I stand on the premise that a strong work ethic will take me farther than those who settle for doing the minimum. Your work ethic is something no one can take from you.”

Grit’s role in getting here

The president said she’s been told she has grit.

“I like the word grit. It’s a close cousin to tough,” she said. “Part of the constant dialogue in my head comes from my dad, saying, ‘You need to be tough.’ At the time, it annoyed me, but looking back, I see how he was setting me up for my future in higher education leadership.”

She said her late father wanted his daughter to fly, “to have dreams and pursue them.”

“He often told me not to settle, whether it was a career choice or a

relationship, and he was always very honest with me about my choices,” she said. “You know, I really miss my dad, so you’ll hear me referring to him often. His dialogue continues in my head.”

Recalling her first day as a freshman at Campbellsville College, she spoke of how scared she was when her parents dropped her off.

“They left me with no car, I didn’t have a checking account, I didn’t have any friends, I didn’t even know anyone,” she said. “I still look back on that day as one of the toughest days of my concluding childhood. I remember it vividly, leaving home and family and making a completely new start.

“I think I cried most of the rest of that day, but I was that kid that wasn’t afraid to ask questions. So, I managed to get a class schedule, books and find the dining hall. I guess you could say the rest is history. A small Christian college changed my life.”

“How to respond to the bad times will prove to be our biggest opportunity to testify and display Christ’s love and presence in our lives,” she said. “I would never in a million years wish things like poverty or racism or gender bias or childhood trauma, ... the list could go on and on. I would never wish that on anyone.

“But if and when you do experience them, lean on God’s wisdom and love to respond and persevere. If you take anything away from my words today, I pray you understand and claim the fact that you are made for more. Wayland is made for more.”