

A Couple with a Vision

In 1983 the Wheatons accepted the challenge to lead Ottawa University, and now they begin a new mission . . .

Dr. Wilbur Wheaton became the 14th president of Ottawa University in January of 1983. Since that time OU has continued to grow and flourish under his leadership. We have experienced nine consecutive balanced budgets, seen consistent growth in enrollment, successfully completed the Heritage of Faith National Campaign, undertaken the \$3.5 million University Wide Information Network plan (UWIN), completely renovated Behan Hall into a state of the art technology center, completed the campaign to renovate Ward Science Hall, and much more.

The following is a conversation with the Wheatons that discusses their plans after they graduated from OU in 1954 through their upcoming retirement endeavors.



After graduating from OU in 1954, did you ever dream that you would retire from OU?
(WW) Not even a dream.
When you left OU in 1954, what were your plans?

(WW) To go into education, to be a mathematics teacher and a football coach. I never did the football..well, I did one year but I wasn't very good at it. Then I wanted to go into administration. I always knew that I wanted to be in school administration.

What were your greatest fears after you accepted the OU presidency?

(WW) I had a couple of them. One was the fact that I really had never had any experience in higher education, but I felt that I could learn that. The other was fund raising. That was something totally foreign to me. Those two areas left me with a lot of anxiety.

Ellen Ann, what were your fears when Wilbur accepted the presidency?

(EW) Well, the school was in a difficult position, and that, I guess worried me. He had always been successful and I wanted him to continue to be successful.

(WW) And that was, I suppose, less my concern because when I accepted the job I did not accept the job to come back and close the school. But yet that was the constant question that year, "Are you gonna make it, are you gonna make it?"



Ellen Ann with the infamous OHYU. He has greeted many guests at the Wheaton's home throughout the years. His name is Japanese for warm water.

Did you ever feel that tomorrow might be OU's last day?

(WW) No, I really didn't. I never allowed myself to ever think that would be the plight, because I just had an awful lot of faith in the people, the alumni, the Baptists, the support of the community. I just felt that there was too much support and too much at stake to think that the other alternative could be there. There had to be a solution, plus recovery had already started and good signs for stability could be seen.

How did you develop stronger community relations? Was there anything you did in particular?

(WW) Well, I felt that the relationship could be strengthened, so Ellen Ann and I made a very conscious effort to commit ourselves to improving the community-school relationship. And so we decided from the very first that I would become actively involved in such things as the Chamber of Commerce, various community organizations, one of the civic clubs, and be very active in the church. Ellen Ann determined exactly the same thing. She would become actively involved in both local and state level church activities, and local clubs and organizations.

(EW) That puts us in contact with people that we probably wouldn't see otherwise.

(WW) So that was programmed. We did that thinking that had to be done and so we committed ourselves.

Did you also make a conscious effort to work within the churches as well?

(EW) We dashed back here in two days from California so we could join the church here, because Wilbur had speaking engagements with churches around Kansas for the next six weeks.

(WW) I told Herman Van Arsdale, who was in church relations that year, "I want this first year to be in as many churches as I can possibly be in." He did a wonderful job! We did that for about the first two years and I can truly say that we've been in many, many, many Baptist churches in the Central Region.

So that was another very conscious effort and we got a great deal of support. We also felt that, coming from California, we needed to let the people of Kansas know that this Californian that came out here to be president of their college wasn't some wild, strange being that they happened to hire. We wanted to have a presence with them, because we're Kansas people too.

What were your goals for OU when you began the presidency, and do you feel you have accomplished what you set out to do?

(WW) I don't think you ever accomplish all of your goals, and I haven't. The major goal that I had was to stabilize the University and put it into an upward growth pattern, -- to secure its future, so to speak. This was my main goal, and yes, I think that's been accomplished.

Naturally, I had additional goals. I would have hoped that the campus enrollment would have grown a little faster. It's grown, but it's really been tough. It's been one of the most difficult things to do, and we have tried several methods to improve recruitment and retention. We made another recruitment change a year and a half ago and I think that is now beginning to pay off with remarkable success. At this point

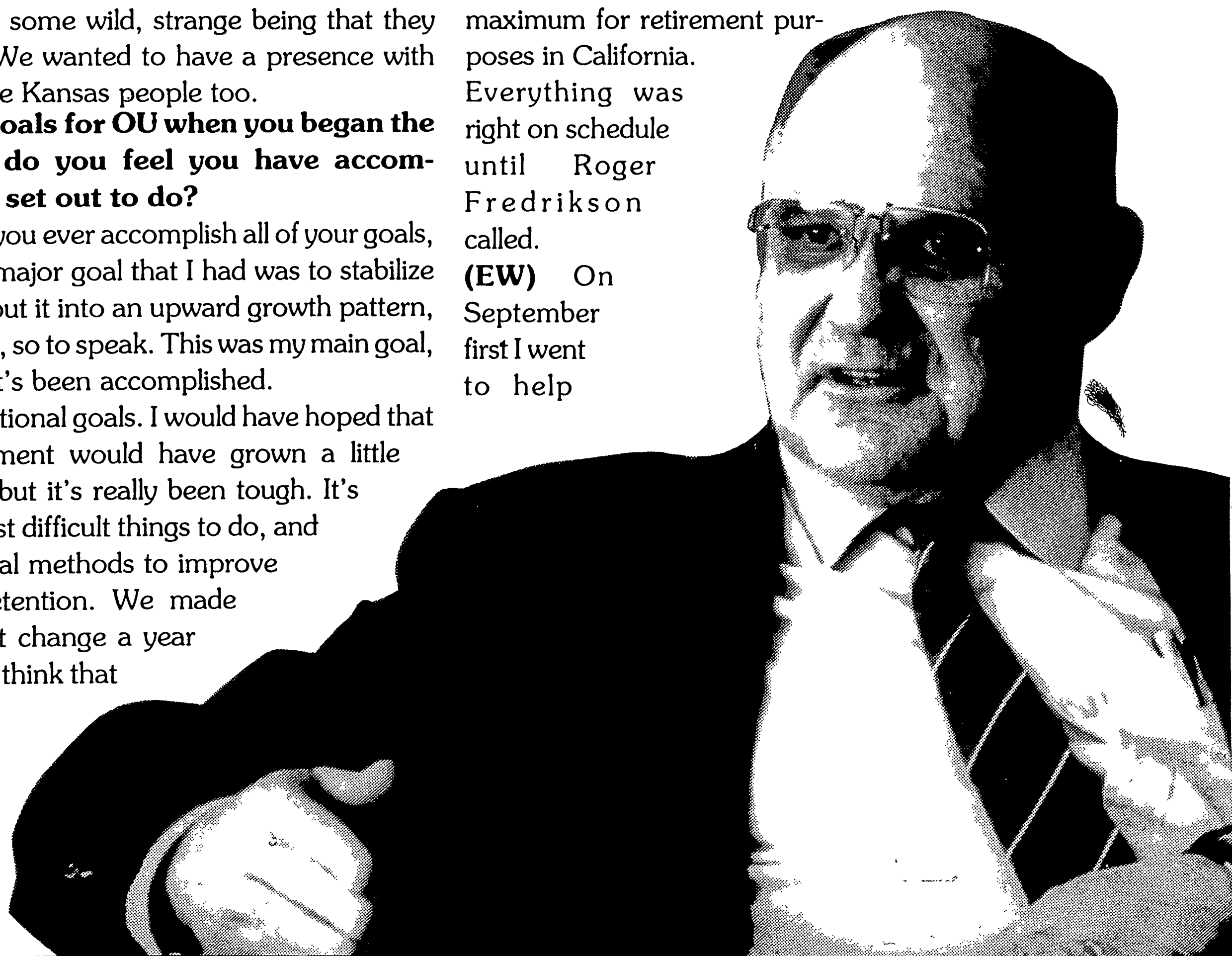
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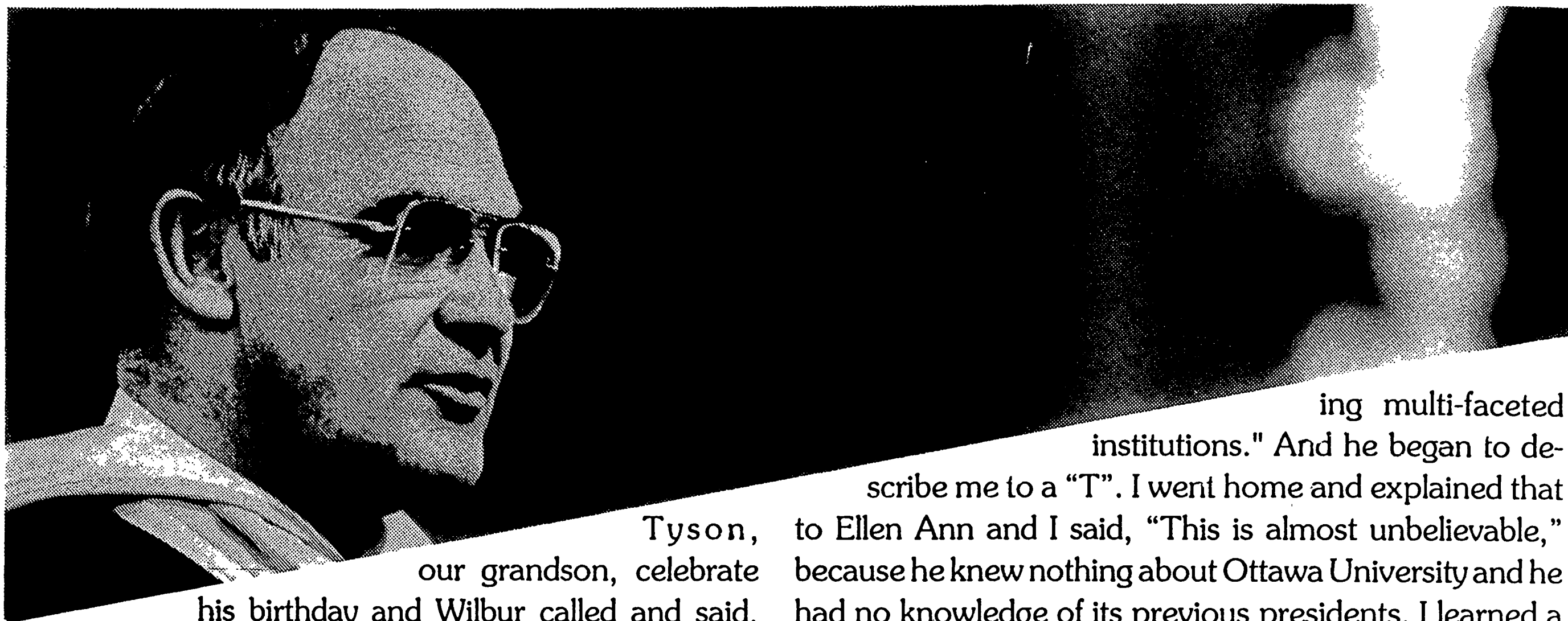
next fall looks very promising. Another thing that I wish is that we would have been able to do more in terms of maintenance on campus. We still have many projects for repair and renovation, and that is a never ending requirement. But we have done a lot and the campus is in relatively good shape. I certainly wish we could have done more.

What were your personal goals ten years ago, before you talked with the Board of Trustees and they asked you to come to Ottawa?

(WW) I had just accepted a new job in California as superintendent of a newly unified school district. Seven school districts had been unified and become one and I was the first superintendent, which is probably one of the greatest jobs because you have plenty of money, and gobs of people. So, I suppose I was the envy of every superintendent in the business. I wasn't in that job two months before I started getting calls from Ottawa. When I went into that job my future was clear. I would retire in eight years as that would be when I hit the maximum for retirement purposes in California. Everything was right on schedule until Roger Fredrikson called.

(EW) On September first I went to help





Tyson, our grandson, celebrate his birthday and Wilbur called and said, "Now don't say anything, but Roger Fredrikson just called, and you'll never guess what he wanted. He wanted me to apply for the Presidency of Ottawa University." And I said, "What did you say?" and he said, "Well, NO, of course."

(WW) So that was our plan. We had an excellent job and an excellent eight years planned, but that changed.

So what convinced you otherwise, to change those goals and to listen to Roger?

(WW) We listened to a lot of people. Finally, Roger said "Would you at least think about it and give it some prayer time?" And I said, "Yeah, I'll do that". We loved OU and we certainly owed our alma mater some serious thought and prayer. But then I realized I knew nothing about what a president does. So I went over to Fresno Pacific College, a private independent college very much like Ottawa, in Fresno, California, and I sat down with the President and said, "Tell me about it. I'm thinking that I need to look into this from a serious point of view." And he said, "Well, let me tell you. College presidents are usually one of three types. One is an academician, with a very strong academic background, innovative, with lots of ideas, very creative in terms of academics." He basically described Peter Armacost to a "T". "Then," he said, "there's a second type, that's the pastor type because we're church-related and we need to build our church relations and keep focused on our mission and what it means to be a church-related college." And he began to describe Bob Shaw to a "T". And then he said, "The third type, and it usually rotates about this way, is to then have more of a generalist, someone who is maybe an educational generalist/manager type and has experience in manag-

ing multi-faceted institutions." And he began to describe me to a "T". I went home and explained that to Ellen Ann and I said, "This is almost unbelievable," because he knew nothing about Ottawa University and he had no knowledge of its previous presidents. I learned a lot from him. I was still thinking "no" but my thinking was much more educated. It was about at that point that we decided that maybe we had better begin to look at it a little bit more openly. From then on we began to lean toward Ottawa University.

What did you miss most about California?

(EW) Our children. It was hard to leave our family. But we have really enjoyed Ottawa. It's been a wonderful way to finish out a career. Ottawa has been good to us.

(WW) We couldn't be happier with our decision. As reluctant as we were in making it, we've never regretted it and always felt that it was absolutely the right thing.

Do you have any rules that you've followed to keep organized and successful?

(WW) I guess a very simple one, and that is "Work Hard." Always be willing to work as hard as you would ever expect anyone else to work, and give it as much time as needs to be given. That would be one rule, and the second rule, one that I've found to be so important for me, is "Hire the best people you can hire." I interview every teaching candidate. We spend a lot of time with people we hire, because I think hiring people is probably the most important job in the presidency. If you hire good people then you can get out of their way and let them make a fine place for students. So I would say that those two are rules I tried to follow.

Who were your mentors and what did you learn from them?

(WW) When I first came Dr. Andrew B. Martin was still here, still alive, and he used to come by the office quite often. I used to try to pick his brain on educational issues

and he used to kind of thwart that because he always felt that he really didn't have that much to offer. So we would end up just conversing, but I think I learned a lot from Dr. Martin in terms of understanding the university and understanding higher education, just from the little conversations that we would have. I also give credit to Peter Armacost and Bob Shaw because I needed their recent experience and their thinking on what was going on and some things that they had done in the university and how I could expand on those, so I learned a great deal from both those gentlemen. I've also enjoyed good relationships with other American Baptist presidents, as well as Kansas college presidents. The second level has been right here locally. Peter Sandstrom is probably one of the finest liberal arts educators that you could find, he really understands what a good, solid liberal arts program can be, so I've learned a lot from him. I've learned fundraising from Jack Patty and Jim Smith - - just learn from people who are here. They are the experts, I'm the generalist. I was fortunate to have outstanding specialists in the areas where I started with fear and trembling.

What is your proudest moment at Ottawa?

(WW) That is really tough to say. I've had a lot of proud moments, I really have. And as I look at them, I think they've been proud moments because of what other people have done. They made it happen.

There are probably three areas that come to mind that make us proud. The first is that we have been able to expand our educational base, both in the United States and overseas, and we have done it without changing our mission. The purity and value of the Ottawa University program is the same for a group of working adults from Malaysia as for traditional students on campus. We now have a Masters Program. The Kansas City and Phoenix Centers are growing rapidly, and the campus has grown by over 36% in nine years. Our international programs add a dimension to us which allow us to become more global in our mission, certainly consistent with Baptist belief. The second area would be facilities. The opening

of the Vera Wise Technology Center in a renovated Behan Hall, the present renovation going on at Ward Science Hall, probably the most important educational building on campus. We have moved both centers in Phoenix and Kansas City to better and larger locations and we have been able to do this during times when money has been tight. All in all it has allowed us to be futuristic -- to assure our students that their education fits them well for the next century. The third is more of an outgrowth of the first two and that is because of increasing in size we have been able to improve our educational offerings. Our faculty on campus has grown from 28 to 42, thereby allowing us to give depth to several of our

majors as well as to expand in some areas of growing concern. Our communications department is one of our popular majors now and with the return of KTJO as one of the finest radio facilities you will find in any college, as well as the return of forensics and debate into the curriculum and extra-curricular program. And of course, the great expansion in technology letting the computer be an additional resource for learning. All of these make Ottawa University a stronger educational institution. The Centers have greatly expanded, not only in curriculum, but in methods of delivery of education. Ottawa University has creative people and what they have done make me extremely proud.

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What will you miss most after retiring?

(WW) I am going to miss the people. We have had a great working relationship with the people here on campus, our Center personnel, with the people in the community, and the Baptists throughout the state and country. We truly enjoyed the alumni relationships as well. We are not the President and First Lady visiting the alumni meeting, we are alumni enjoying friendship with other alums, and we can tell the same stories that they can tell. That has been a real highlight. But I would have to say, too, that we have enjoyed the students. We really enjoy being around them. They're a fun group and they keep us young. So it's that whole realm of OU people that we come into contact with daily that we will greatly miss.

(EW) I too will miss the people. It's just been a coming

home for me. I grew up here in Ottawa, and it's been interesting for me to become reacquainted with people I knew as a child and have now become a part of their lives once again as an adult. We'll really miss this community, and the alums.

What will you miss the least?

(WW) Meetings. Meetings. You have to spend a lot of time in meetings, and I'm not going to miss that.

(EW) I won't miss the calls from Wilbur saying, "You've got to be over here in five minutes."

Or that Wilbur is bringing someone home in a half-an-hour, and I need to put something on the table or get the beds ready. Although that has never been a problem.

What do you hope the faculty, staff and students have learned about Wilbur Wheaton during your tenure?

(WW) I suppose I would want them to know that I care...that I really care about them. And, sometimes in a management position, you do things that appear that is not the case because you make decisions that are unpopular. So I would say that I wish that they would understand that I really care about them. And that I try to be open and honest with them. I have tried to do that.

How important has Ellen Ann been to your presidency?

(WW) Because of the fact that we came into this with neither one of us knowing what we were doing, we knew we would be struggling together, and that we would have to depend on each other. So we made a covenant to each other that we would really support one another. Ellen Ann has been extremely important to me because of the fact that there are some areas where I knew that she would be much better in working with some people or helping me work with some people than I could alone. So very early on we determined that she would, as much as possible, go with me when making major development calls. And so about the second or third year, I asked the Board of Trustees, "Rather than look at a raise, let's look at giving Ellen Ann a travel allowance." So we put her on a travel allowance, that lets her travel with me most of the time. And so I depend on her a great deal. The second thing we

determined was that this would be a dual job. We'd basically do it together. Our whole life would be University and community oriented. I don't think I could have done it any other way...I just couldn't have.

Who's had the greatest influence on your presidency?

(WW) The Board of Trustees in terms of they've allowed me, with their support, to push out in some areas that were probably a little risky, but I felt that we had to take

risks. I tried not to put the university in jeopardy in doing that. I think the Board has had a great deal of influence because they've allowed and supported these efforts. I give the board a lot of credit; they are dedicated, bright people who are totally committed to Ottawa University.

How would you like to be remembered?

(WW) As I look at a lot of my predecessors, they probably have some great innovative things that you would say, "This president could be remembered

for this, and this president for that." I don't think that's going to happen with our tenure here. We really haven't had those dramatic, great things...it's probably been more stabilizing and trying to inch forward and find ways of improving the University as a whole. So I don't think I'll be remembered for anything very dramatic or innovative. Maybe I'll just be remembered for the fact that we made a difference, that Ottawa's a different place today and is on its way to a strong future.

Where would you like to see OU in ten years?

(WW) Well, I'll be a little specific here: 750 student enrollment on campus, which I think is probably a good size for campus; an endowment of double what it is now if not more, say ten million dollars or more; and another center. I'd like to see OU in ten years with those differences, but also to be the same. That it's still a personal place, a place where people help people, and that we never get out of that...that we hold to our mission. I would hope it would be a more dynamic place in terms of departments that are solid because of the growth that will allow it. For us to improve we've got to have growth. We cannot improve that much without a larger student body. That's why we try to put so much emphasis in the

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area of admissions and recruiting. I think it's paying off.

Where do you see private liberal arts education headed? Just days ago, St. Mary of the Plains College announced that they're closing. Do you see that happening to more small colleges like Ottawa?

(WW) My feeling is that problems in all of higher education are going to get worse before they get better. When we see major private institutions such as Stanford and Yale making dramatic cutbacks, and public institutions decreasing budgets and cutting back personnel, and seeing the closure of small colleges every year, then we must recognize that times are tough. It is such a thin line between failure and success. I strongly believe that small colleges must broaden their base of revenue in programming. College can't just depend on the 18-to-22-year-old market, especially since that market continues to decrease in numbers for another four or five years. Struggling for new programs can be risky and not all risk will pay off. Fortunately, Ottawa University, as many as twenty years ago, began to see the future quite clearly and expanded into educating the working adult. More closures may happen but Ottawa University will not be one of them with the growth of campus as well as our Centers and International programming. Our future is bright if we hold to our mission and wisely manage our business. That's my opinion, for what it's worth.

What advice would you give the next OU president?

(WW) Hire good people and get out of their way. I guess that's the only advice I can give. Be willing to trust people, because there are marvelous thinkers, marvelous people who are willing to work hard and be creative. Just support them and give them the tools they need to be successful.

Ellen Ann, what advice would you give to the next First Lady?

(EW) Just to relax and enjoy...it will happen. Be yourself.

I know you were very involved and past first ladies have been, but do you feel that's a requirement for the job, to get into it as much as your husband does?

(EW) Not necessarily. I think that's an individual preference, because I think you find some presidents' wives today who have a career of their own and really aren't all that involved in school activities. But now for me, I would have really missed it if I hadn't been involved. I think it's been a wonderful experience.

What are your plans after retirement?

(WW) Well, something we had in our minds for a number of years was to volunteer in some type of church activity, preferably with International Ministries, when we decided to retire. We both, especially Ellen Ann, have a real passion for missions, especially in the Far East because Ellen Ann taught the Hmongs in Fresno, and she's been involved in a lot of activity with missions. As soon as we decided that we would be retiring we decided that we would apply for volunteer work with International Missions. They take a couple hundred volunteers a year and the application process to be a volunteer is much more difficult than to be a president. We look at retirement as



The Wheatons with their own family "Hall of Fame".

an opportunity to do some things, and to pay back some. We've been blessed tremendously and we need to pay back some of that to people who have blessed us. We've been assigned to be at Sammuk Christian Academy in Bang Saen, Thailand. And we have been asked to be there on September first to start language orientation

school in Bangkok. We're pretty nervous about the language.

(EW) We bought a tape of the Thai language and we can't remember one phrase we learned.

(WW) It's a tonal language and it's not easy. I can't even hear the difference in tone.

But it's nice for a change to be following a real passion that Ellen Ann has had for a long time. We're awfully excited about the next two years. We just hope and pray that we can be of real service to those young people in Thailand.

Will you be working with the children directly?

(WW) We'll be in a boarding school, of high school and grade school levels. Ellen Ann will be teaching music and English as a second language. They've indicated that they want me to be of help with some administration, maybe some professional training for staff members and help strengthen their teaching skills.

(EW) When we finally arrive at the academy campus we will have a place to live that will be provided, right on campus. And we can eat at the school cafeteria. It's Thai food . . . they said we might want to have some American food occasionally.

(WW) When you think of someone volunteering in the mission field of Thailand you probably think of a grass hut with stilts and animals underneath and no running water or bathroom facility. That's not the case at all. We understand Bang Saen is a beautiful place. It's right on the Gulf of Thailand, so it's very close to the beach. It's 65 miles southeast of Bangkok, so it's close to the major city but yet away from the pollution. We won't be suffering, just enjoying a wonderful opportunity.

Do you have any plans after your two years in Thailand?

(WW) After that we're not sure.

We'll come back and decide where to settle. We still have a lot of other things we'll want to do. We'd like to do some more travel, I'd like to teach some more, not full time, but possibly teach in the Phoenix program. Our grandchildren really need us to be closer, or maybe it's the other way around.

(EW) We told our children we would spend a year moving around from one family to the next, four months with each of them. I'm afraid they thought I was serious.

(WW) We'd love to see a lot more of the United States in very leisurely travel. Motor-home-type travel fits us well.

(EW) It all sounds like the life of Riley.

(WW) Of course, we will return to Ottawa often, especially to join the class of '54 at reunion time.

