

Dero G. Downing
April 4, 2011

I often heard President Downing use the phrase “Universities have personalities.” He was right because he, in large measure, defined the personality of Western Kentucky University. I have used this analogy many times when telling prospective students, faculty, and staff about WKU and why it is unique. When I do that, I think of Dero Downing.

The WKU spirit filled Dero Downing’s personal and professional life. He lived it in everything he pursued. His strong values and loyalties were shaped by those who preceded him in the office he held for ten years. His faith and his passions were forged by beliefs which his family planted deep within his Kentucky roots—and which he nurtured in the family which he and Harriet raised.

No one questioned Dero Downing’s loyalty and commitment to his alma mater and its traditions. In fact, his life was lived in witness to and with significant influence on those rare and rich traditions that distinguish WKU in American higher education.

WKU had only four presidents from 1906 to 1979: Cherry. Garrett. Thompson. Downing. The rest of us have simply tried to live up to their legacy and build on the Hill to which they devoted their lives.

Dero Downing’s passing is the closing of an era for our beloved institution and for higher education in Kentucky. From the principal’s office at College High to the Presidency of WKU, he exuded leadership, style, eloquence, and empathy for the thousands of students, faculty, and staff with whom he worked and for whom he labored. I was one of those. He was my President when I entered WKU as a student in 1969 and when I began my first job at WKU in 1974. I watched him define the personality of WKU—a personality that lives and breathes today and will do so for generations to come. He has also been a valued source of insight and inspiration for me as I have occupied his office these last 13 1/2 years.

The WKU Family raises the Red Towel in honor of its fourth President—Dero G. Downing. A man of honor, loyalty, and spirit—a patriarch in the great history of the University he served throughout his adult life.

Gary A. Ransdell