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Ransdells honored as distinguished WKU alumni

By AARON MUDD amudd@bgdailynews.com Oct 13, 2017

AARON MUDD/amudd@bgdailynews.com

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Julie Ransdell (from left) stands with WKU President Timothy Caboni, Gary Ransdell and President of the Alumni Association Deanna Mills as the Ransdells are honored at the 2017 Hall of Distinguished Alumni.

AARON MUDD/amudd@bgdailynews.com

After hosting annual Hall of Distinguished Alumni luncheons for 20 years, former Western Kentucky University President Gary Ransdell and his wife, Julie, took their turns being honored Friday.

“It’s a little strange to be on the other side of the podium,” Ransdell joked in an interview at the event.

After passing the torch to new WKU President Timothy Caboni and closing a transformative chapter in WKU’s history, Ransdell said he’s spent the past few months maintaining important relationships.

“You don’t just turn off those relationships that are so dear for so long,” he said.

Ransdell said he’s also preparing for his next adventure as president and chief executive officer of Semester at Sea, a study abroad program, beginning Jan. 1.

For Caboni, the occasion was a chance to celebrate two monumental figures in WKU’s history.

“For the past 20 years, they served WKU as a team,” Caboni said in his remarks to luncheon attendees at the Sloan Convention Center. “So it is most appropriate, and indeed quite special, that we induct them as a team. The successful transformation of our university has been their life’s work, a labor of love that began the day they stepped on the hill as students. We are grateful for their leadership, service and dedication to this institution, to this community and especially to our faculty, our staff and our students.”

Caboni said he and his wife, Kacy, appreciated how the Ransdells welcomed them during the transition to their new roles.

During the event, attendees watched a biographical video on the honorees.

Born in Louisville, Gary Ransdell spent his childhood as the youngest of three children who went on to become a leader in his high school’s student government and work odd jobs during the summer. In 1969, he headed to WKU with a clock radio and a trunk of clothing.

Julie was born nine days before Gary in the fall of 1951 in Danville and later moved to Louisville with her family. The video described Julie as an introvert who planned to attend WKU to get a degree in elementary education.

The two met in the fall of 1971 at a Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity party. However, the attraction wasn’t mutual at first.

“The funny thing was it was love at first sight for him, but it was not so much love at first sight for me,” Julie Ransdell joked in the video, adding she was dating someone else at the time.

Gary and Julie Ransdell married in their senior year. Gary Ransdell graduated with a bachelor’s degree in mass communications in 1973 and a master of public service and public administration in 1974. Julie earned a bachelor’s degree in elementary education a year later.

It was the influence and friendship of WKU's fifth president, John D. Minton, that inspired Gary Ransdell to want to become a university president.

That dream came true in the fall of 1997 when he became the university's ninth president.

Together, Gary and Julie Ransdell's accomplishments included rebuilding a "crumbling" campus, creating an international presence for the university, developing a philanthropic culture around the university and re-energizing WKU's spirit, according to the video.

In her remarks, Julie thanked members of the WKU community and the friends she's made over the years. As a dog lover, she compared those attending the luncheon to sheep dogs that watch over their flocks.

"You are the great protectors of WKU," she said. "Through your gifts of time, talent and resources, you are caring for something outside of yourselves, and like the lamb, WKU is very vulnerable. She will need you as a guardian, and that's what makes you special. She has potential, and it will take every one of you for her to reach that potential."

In an emotional speech from Gary Ransdell, he also shared his gratitude to the university community in helping him move WKU forward.

“This is it for me,” he said. “Nothing else, nowhere else, matters to me to the degree that WKU matters to me.”

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Aaron Mudd

Education reporter. Covers education and related issues, focusing primarily on the Bowling Green and Warren County public school districts and Western Kentucky University.