

Relationships— Staying Connected With Alumni

**BY ROBERT R. MENDENHALL
WITH BEVERLY A. MENDENHALL**

The idea for this article probably began some 25 years ago. As both a communication professor at Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU) and general manager of the institution's radio station (both in Keene, Texas), I enjoyed as much as the students did the weekly "polls" that appeared on the station's old blackboard. But the one I will never forget was the question that asked simply, "What is your philosophy of life in one word?"

The teacher in me grabbed the chalk and wrote, "Learn," and I smugly thought my answer was at least semi-brilliant—that is, until I passed the board a couple of days later and was captivated by another answer a student had written: "Relationships." Immediately, I realized the significance of that response, and over the years that idea and all it implies has become my philosophy of life.

Nothing in life is more important than relationships. Whether it's your spouse, your children, your best friend, the books you read, the food you eat, the way you relate to your environment, or any other aspect of your daily life, relationships are essential. Attention to all our relationships is critical—especially our relationship with God. Cultivating relationships takes time, but relationships with former students often grow to be lifelong friendships and are among the greatest joys a teacher can know.

About the same time I was relishing my new one-word philo-

Reasons to carry on a systematic program of planned, personal, and continual contact with alumni include the opportunities that such a program provides for inviting them to attend annual alumni reunions, for advancing them in their careers, and for encouraging them in their personal relationship with Christ.

sophy of life, my wife, Bev, was asked to join SWAU's Advancement Office team, where one of her duties was to assist with alumni relations. Among the courses I was teaching was public relations. It didn't take us long to recognize the affinity of our assignments—hers with all the university's alumni and mine with current students, as well as our communication graduates around the world. No doubt about it, we realized, interpersonal relations and communication are inextricably interwoven.

Nearly 10 years had elapsed since SWAU graduated its first communication major, but I quickly set to work collecting their names from my own files and from university records. With Bev's help, I found current addresses for every one. Recent graduates tend to move more often than those who have "settled

down," and while it's sometimes a challenge to keep alumni addresses current, it's not impossible.

Try a Quarterly Newsletter

The primary method I use to keep addresses current is another great way to stay in touch with grads. I write and mail each one a quarterly departmental newsletter. Each edition of the newsletter is sent in an envelope with a first-class stamp and with *Address Service Requested* printed below the return address. Because address service requests are generally honored for six months, the newsletter is forwarded to any grad who has moved, and the post office sends us changes of address so we can update our records. Even today,



2008 Southwestern Adventist University (SWAU) Alumni Homecoming honorees.

with 234 communication graduates since 1975, at last count I had current addresses for all but four.

We call our newsletter the *Live Wire!* It's just a single, bright-yellow page printed front and back that generally includes two or three feature stories. On the back page of every edition is another key to staying in touch with alumni—a column entitled “What We've Been Up To.” Each starts—“Here's what we've heard from our Southwestern Communication grads in recent weeks” and ends with: “We'd like to share what you've been up to with communication students and alumni in the *Live Wire!* Just e-mail Communication Department Chair Dr. Bob Mendenhall at bobm@swau.edu.” Our grads love to read the newsletter, and many keep in touch with each other using the e-mail addresses we include at the end of each person's information. As our on-campus students read the publication, they get great ideas about the wide range of communication-related careers available after graduation. We always have lots of material—in fact, nearly all “What We've Been Up To” columns take up much of the back page.



Lou Ann (Hill) Harris ('58) wearing her 50-year class jacket.

We always list graduates for whom we need addresses, and alumni will often send e-mails with information about “missing persons,” including even “My Space” addresses to help us locate them. Keeping addresses up-to-date is always a work in progress, but faculty and alumni—even relatives, classmates, and friends—network with one another and with us to make it happen.

Reasons to Stay in Touch

While alumni are potential donors, there are a number of other good reasons to stay in touch—many, we would argue, just as important as the possibility of future gifts. Frequent contact with alumni reminds them of their own favorable expe-



Alumnae Dena Drane King ('02) and Karla Lopez ('05) at SWAU's annual Ice Cream Social. Both work in the university's Advancement Office.

While alumni are potential donors, there are a number of other good reasons to stay in touch—many, we would argue, just as important as the possibility of future gifts.

periences on campus, and makes them more likely to recommend their alma mater to both their children and to others as they plan for college.

During group meetings or in individual phone calls, e-mails, or letters, alumni can be encouraged to volunteer their time for special projects. Those who live within driving distance of campus are generally willing to share their ideas and expertise in the classroom or at specially arranged seminars. Established alumni can be introduced to new graduates, and many will offer to become mentors for those who live nearby and/or have similar careers.

Alumni Weekend at Southwestern

Registration for our annual Alumni Homecoming Weekend begins Thursday afternoon with a homecoming banquet, generally featuring a Southwestern Adventist University “memories” theme. During this festive occasion, the current year's honorees are recognized, including our Alumna and Alumnus of the Year, as well as new inductees into our university's Hall of Fame. Friday morning begins with a prayer breakfast featuring an alumnus as speaker, then we hold the annual meeting of our “Committee of 100,” a group that is now much larger than 100 persons, each of whom supports Southwestern with gifts totaling more



Collectors' magazine sale at SWAU's Alumni Homecoming.



Roxy (Youngs) Hoehn and Jim Hoehn ('58 graduates) with the banquet gown and jacket they wore 50 years ago.



Anyone who wishes to do so may enter the Sunday 5K “Fun Run” during SWAU's Alumni Weekend.

than \$1,000 annually. Alumni have the afternoon free for tours of campus and the community, after which the Friday evening vespers program spotlights our student music groups.

The two Sabbath morning church services feature different speakers from the honored classes. For example, the sermon at our early service in 2007 was presented by Leighton Holley, president of the Texas Conference, while Don Schneider, president of the North American Division, delivered the message for the second service. In 2008, Jeff Bromme, an attorney in the Washington, D.C., area, gave the message at the early service, and the sermon for the later service was presented by retired Kansas-Nebraska Conference president Jim Hoehn.

After church, the focal point is the annual alumni potluck lunch in the university's gymnasium. Practice and experience have made it possible for our alumni volunteers to direct some

1,500 alumni and their families through multiple serving lines in less than 15 minutes! Besides providing the food quickly, the system also creates time for visiting, as alumni gather in small clusters at tables and chairs on the main floor.

On Sabbath afternoon, there are departmental open houses, some of which are open to all visitors—such as our biology department's bone collection from their notable dinosaur digs in Wyoming. Other departments, like communication, education, business, and music, invite alumni to reminisce with teachers and students. Our nursing department hosts an annual tea, and every five years the university's radio station, KJCR (88.3 FM), invites communication grads and other students who worked on the air to gather at the station.

Saturday night brings a host of honored class reunions and parties—usually from nine to 11 of them each year—all very

For Additional Information on Alumni Relations, Try These Resources

Organizations

CASE (Council for Advancement and Support of Education)
1307 New York Avenue, NW
Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005-4701
(202) 328-CASE (2273)
<http://www.case.org>

PSI (Philanthropic Service for Institutions)
Adventist World Headquarters
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600
(301) 680-6138
<http://www.philanthropicservice.com>

Books

Feudo, John and Clifford, Paul J., eds. *Alumni Clubs and Chapters* (CASE, 2002)

Feudo, John, ed. *Alumni Relations: A Newcomer's Guide to Success* (CASE, 1999)

Harris, April L. *Etiquette and Protocol: A Guide for Campus Events* (CASE, 1999)

_____. *Special Events: Planning for Success*, 2nd ed. (CASE, 1998)

Rowland, A. Wesley. *Handbook of Institutional Advancement: A Modern Guide to Executive Management, Institutional Relations, Fund-Raising, Alumni Administration, Government*. . . . Jossey-Bass Higher Education Series (Proquest Info & Learning, 1986).

Tromble, William W. *Excellence in Advancement: Applications for Higher Education and Nonprofit Organizations* (Aspen Publishers, 1998)

Articles

"Alumni Administration: Selected Chapter from the Handbook of Institutional Advancement," Electronic file (CASE, 2004)

"Classic CURRENTS: Trends in Alumni Relations" (CASE, 2003)
19 articles published in *CURRENTS* magazine from 2000 through 2003 chart developments and outline best professional practices in the rapidly changing field of alumni relations.

Stutler, Doug and Calvario, Dave; "In Alumni Support, Satisfaction Matters," *Fund Raising Management* (HTML, digital, magazine online)

Interactive CD-ROM

"Building Strong Alumni Communities: How Structured Networking Motivates Alumni"; Presenters: Meg Brzyski Husband, Chief Regional Development Office, Marquette University; Lynne Waymon, President, Contacts Count, CD-ROM/Electronic file (CASE, 2007)

"Students Today, Alumni Forever: Developing Lifelong Relationships With Our Alumni-in-Residence"; Presenter: Carin Huffman Grinch, Assistant Director, Student Programs and Athletic Events, University of Missouri Alumni Association, CD-ROM/Electronic file (CASE, 2007)

well attended. As alumni director, Bev tries to visit each class party. I enjoy going along, and our university president, Eric Anderson, his wife Loretta, and other interested faculty members often attend as well. Sunday morning begins with a pancake breakfast, followed by an annual golf tournament that contributes to the university's annual fund.

Ways to Stay in Touch

Once you have developed an alumni-centered mindset, you'll find more and more ways of connecting with alumni. Whatever you do, wherever you go, as you make your plans, think of possibilities for making contact.

Some of those contacts—especially meetings that include church services—are carefully planned and coordinated. SWAU hosts 10 or 12 annual area alumni reunions—often two on the same weekend where many former students live—one for older alumni and one for younger grads. Sometimes we meet at a local alum's home, but we've also met at recommended restaurants, if we can get at least a semi-private room in which to present a computerized slide program and answer questions.

SWAU's Website (<http://www.swau.edu>) features an "Alumni and Friends" button that takes the user to the main alumni

Once you have developed an alumni-centered mindset, you'll find more and more ways of connecting with alumni.

page. From there, alumni can click on "Contact Alumni Office" and provide updated information. Bev responds immediately by e-mail, and to those who send birth announcements, for example, she will even send baby "onesies" or toddler t-shirts featuring SWAU's logo and "Future Grad" printed prominently on the front.

Before we travel, Bev and I consider possible alumni contacts. Major events—General Conference sessions, Adventist-laymen's Services and Industries (ASI) conventions, teachers' and ministers' conferences, and professional communication conferences—all offer opportunities to contact alumni. Upon arrival, we always check the event program for participants and exhibitors who are SWAU alumni. We seek each out, and often plan an evening out with as many as we can discover. Other out-of-town university responsibilities and even personal vacations can provide informal opportunities to stay in touch with individual alumni. Bev teaches a "getting in shape" to ski and snowboard class, and during our annual trips to Colorado, where the students take a lesson from a professional on the slopes, we've often skied with alumni who are there, too. During one of our area alumni reunions in Florida, we learned serendipitously that an alumnus was to be married that weekend. We were invited to attend—and were delighted

Some Ideas That Work to Maintain Alumni Relationships

Develop an Alumni-Centered Focus

- Establish a regular, systematic contact program
- Encourage and acknowledge e-mail
- Feature dedicated alumni pages on your Website
- Order baby and toddler "Future Grad" T-shirts

Maintain Up-to-Date Addresses

- Request "Address Service" from the post office on envelopes
- Use the Internet ("Google," "My Space," etc.)
- Contact family members, classmates, friends
- Have other traveling faculty/staff watch for names
- Check church publications (bulletins, directories, yearbooks) for alumni names
- Interact with class coordinators/class agents

Quarterly Newsletter (especially good for individual departments)

Creative and Eventful Alumni Weekend (some events can be fundraisers)

- Make it affordable
- Get outstanding speakers
- Homecoming banquet
- Potluck lunch on Sabbath
- Honor class photos
- Department open houses
- Honor class parties

- Sunday morning breakfast
- Alumni golf tournament

Annual Key Area Alumni Reunions

- Younger alums
- Older alums

Host Sabbath School and Church Services Off Campus Watch for Alumni at Major Conventions

- Program agenda
- List of exhibitors

Business or Vacation Trips

- Contact alumni in the areas you'll be visiting
- Meet alumni for a meal

Camp Meeting

- Watermelon feed or other special events
- Opportunities to contact alumni and recruit students

Birthday Cards to Alumni

Annual Phonathon (recruit faculty as well as student callers)

On Campus (Alumni Office and Alumni Association)

- Presence at Freshman Orientation ("Survivor" bags)
- Alumni "Ice Cream Social" early in school year
- Presence at graduation (mini-diploma, reception)
- Institutional museum (if not a building, at least a room)

to discover that some 18 SWAU alums were there as well. Even on vacation, Bev and I seek opportunities to share some time with alums. We've met alumni throughout the United States as we pass through—flying or driving—and we've even made contact with alums in a number of foreign countries.

Every summer, we travel to camp meetings throughout the Southwestern Union Conference, where on Sabbath afternoon the SWAU Alumni Association sponsors an outdoor watermelon feed. A university spokesperson announces the event before the morning worship service and always includes a bit of news and information about the school, and we make sure that everyone in attendance—not just alumni—know they are welcome. Bev calls the food-service director at each camp meeting to be sure the melons are ordered and kept cold for us. These events have been wildly successful over the years. Not only do we have an opportunity to interact with individual alumni during the event, but we've even had a prospective student's father discover that it wasn't too late to enroll his son at the university. The young man finished four years later as a theology graduate, and is now serving as a missionary.

Bev also makes sure that each edition of *The Southwestern Spirit* contains "AlumNotes," information she receives on forms collected at area alumni reunions and through e-mail. On another page, alumni deaths, weddings, and babies are highlighted. We both scan Adventist publications from around the world regularly for SWAU alumni names, and as we travel, we look carefully for alumni who may be listed in church bul-



Lillian (Sanford) Davis ('60) and Corinna Razafindrakoto ('05) at SWAU's 2008 Alumni Homecoming.



Parker and Conner Henderson, twin sons of Nathan ('05) and Natalie ('01), model their "Future Grad" SWAU "onesies."



SWAU's Alumni Association hosts several camp meeting watermelon feeds each summer.

letins. Church directories and the *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* are also fine sources of information and a variety of Internet search engines also help us locate alums.

During freshman orientation each year, SWAU's enrollment office hosts a freshman welcome night. Bev and the alumni office assist by providing alumni to speak for Saturday night worship. The speakers always include stories of how the university impacted their lives—spiritually, academically, and socially—preparing them for the challenges and opportunities they would face. At the end of the program, Bev addresses the freshmen as "alumni in residence," distributing "Survivor" bags and snacks to each student as she welcomes them to the university.

Each commencement weekend, Bev meets the seniors at graduation practice and welcomes them officially into the SWAU Alumni Association. Along with other "send-off" gifts, each graduate receives a mini laminated copy of his or her diploma. The Alumni Association sponsors the senior reception after the commencement exercises.

SWAU is also blessed to have an entire building built and dedicated specifically as a campus museum. A gift to the university, the Hopps Museum and Welcome Center is modeled after one of the original buildings on campus. It is located across the street from an enduring campus landmark, the Mizpah Gate, a gift of the Class of 1937. Besides featuring displays of campus memorabilia, the Hopps Museum serves as a regular meeting place for our alumni board, as well as current and former teachers and students.

Over the years, few things have provided more pleasure for us than staying in touch with alumni. Even today, however, I don't know which radio station staffer offered "relationships" as his or her one-word philosophy of life, but that single word written on that hallway blackboard has affected my life more profoundly than he or she will ever know.

Nothing is more important than relationships. *Nothing.* ✍



Robert R. Mendenhall, Ph.D., is Professor of Communication and Chair of the Communication Department at Southwestern Adventist University in Keene, Texas. He has served as a dean of men and a college radio station manager. **Beverly A. Mendenhall, B.S.**, is Alumni Relations Director at the university, where she has also taught classes in the Office Administration Department and continues to teach a class in the Physical Education Department.