Thoughts on Dennis Spellman--contributed by Louis Launer

Mike McMurran pretty much mentioned that I attended Lindenwood and received a journalism degree in his column last week. With Lindenwood University President Dennis Spellman’s passing on August 30, 2006, it is a significant loss to the St. Charles community.

Spellman was not the President of Lindenwood University when I was attended there and received my Bachelor of Arts degree in Mass Communications (with an English minor). In fact, I graduated from Lindenwood =College=, when Jim Spainhower was President.

However, as an alumnus of Lindenwood, I do have my memories of President Spellman.

One of the first memories I had in my encounters with him was when I was helping to put
on the Mrs. Sibley’s Attic Sale that the St. Charles Lindenwood Alumni Club held in the 1980s and early 1990s. I had coffee with Mr. Spellman in the President’s house early in the morning after I had finished setting up for the day-long event on campus. He saw me and invited me inside while the rest of the attic sale was getting underway. I found him to be quite an interesting gentleman. He was quite knowledgeable on several subjects and he definitely knew what he was doing. He was one of those who was determined to get something done, even with those who said “it can’t be done.”

I admit that at first when Dennis Spellman took over the presidency in 1990 that I was one of those skeptics who doubted that he would really make a difference at Lindenwood. The New York Times criticized Dennis Spellman because there were controversies from when he was an administrator at Missouri Valley College, Maryville College (now Maryville University) and Tarkio College, which closed a year after Spellman arrived at Lindenwood. My skepticism took several years and I watched a campus improve. I believe it was the opening of the Spellman Center, where the new KCLC-FM was located that made me become quite a believer in Lindenwood and that Spellman had definitely established a renaissance. The New York Times was wrong about this gentleman. Lindenwood was the opportunity and Spellman turned around the institution.

Throughout the 1990s and into this century, I have served with the St. Charles Lindenwood Alumni Club, who also had their doubts at first about what Spellman was doing with the college and later, university. Many didn’t like some of the changes that were taking place. Some didn’t even like introducing a football team and other sports.
The Mrs. Sibley’s Attic Sales stopped in 1992 and with quite a good reason. Mr. Spellman didn’t like the quadrangle grounds torn up by automobiles who parked there in a caravan style to sell crafts and antiques. So our alumni club came up with a better fundraiser, which was a luncheon and fashion show. We were fortunate that Spellman and Lindenwood purchased the old St. Charles Country Club and converted it to the Lindenwood University Club. I admit that I was “drafted” by the alumni club to be one of the alumni “models” for the fundraiser. I thought it was silly at first. But I thought it was quite a good event and fifteen years later, I’m still a celebrity alumnus serving as one of the “models.” Many times during those events, I had the honor of having lunch with Mr. Spellman.

In fact, I had lunch with him at last year’s alumni fall fashion show. I was at a table joined with Mrs. Lou Brock. I remember Mr. Spellman stressing that the college needed to help preserve American values and the American culture. Looking back at what he has done, he has accomplished it. Lindenwood is debt free and is very much alive. There are satellite campuses throughout the region and literally throughout the world. He has helped preserve the Daniel Boone Home in Defiance, an undertaking that no one else in the community or the county had the resources to do.

As I said earlier, I never attended Lindenwood when Spellman was President. In retrospect, Lindenwood needed Dennis Spellman to survive. Lindenwood was dying in the 1980s under a Chairman of the Board named Robert Hyland. Mr. Hyland may have appointed Dennis Spellman as President to either save the college or transfer the assets and real estate over to the St. Charles Community College (which was Mr. Hyland’s plan...
before Dennis Spellman arrived). I was just as concerned with Mr. Spellman’s ideas at first compared with what Mr. Hyland planned to do to give away Lindenwood to the Community College.

There are times where Mike McMorrann will e-mail me after reading my work saying “I missed my calling.” While I attended Lindenwood at the same time as local sportscaster Randy Karraker, local St. Charles resident Suzanne Riddler and the St. Louis American’s Earl Austin, Jr., the department where we studied journalism was absolutely terrible. The chances of making it in a big, major market and keeping that job was at that time and still is today, astronomical. Dennis Spellman cleaned the communications department up, especially in this current decade with the new facility for KCLC-FM, Lindenwood’s television facility (channel 26 on Charter Communications), and this fall, the real return to a true journalism department by resurrecting a true journalism degree program that has been dormant since the 1940s. Mr. Spellman did assure me indirectly that my degree from Lindenwood was really worth something. But I have wished that Spellman had arrived eight years earlier than he did. I still hold lots of respect for Jim Spainhower, who was President when I attended and graduated from Lindenwood. I never held any respect for Robert Hyland. Hyland treated Lindenwood, particularly KCLC-FM as a “farm team” for KMOX. Mr. Spellman brought back “values-centered” education, something badly needed in our society today.

Dennis Spellman was very courageous and he had to deal with lots of controversy. In the long run, he was correct most of the time. He did know his limitations. But he tried his best to make Lindenwood University a valuable part of the St. Charles community and not
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just a college within a town.

posted by Anton @ 6:47 AM