

# A DISTINGUISHED DOZEN

Novelist, columnist, and Wesleyan parent **Anna Quindlen** talks with **President Douglas J. Bennet '59** about a dozen years that have significantly changed Wesleyan.

**A** **NNA QUINDLEN:** I've known Wesleyan for four years since my son arrived here as a member of the class of 2007. In what ways was Wesleyan different in 1995 when you became president?

**DOUGLAS J. BENNET:** It was not as recognized for its academic qualities as it is now. That was a big problem because academic excellence is crucial. I think we've managed to shift that so academic excellence is the first thing people think about—not over four years, but over 12 years.

**AQ:** How did you make that shift happen?

**DJB:** By reaffirming the academic purpose of the place. The campus community had a really good conversation about what a liberal education should look like. That created a basis for everything else; all our strategic plans grew out of that. I think all institutions must go through their own processes of retesting and redefining what they do. Having done that, I think we have a very interesting story to tell about Wesleyan.

**AQ:** Your predecessor complained that the diversity gods had taken over the academy here, but students are quoted in the *Argus* as complaining that you are trying to

move Wesleyan too much toward the mainstream. Which is it: loosey goosey or tighty whitey?

**DJB:** It's an elevated combination of the two. Diversity is crucial to an education. People who don't experience it are going to suffer in a global world, and the people who do experience it are going to be truly educated in ways that go beyond the classroom. We have shown that diversity and academic excellence go together; they are not at odds with each other. One of the difficulties I have with my predecessor is that he has tended to see things in tension with each other, and I just don't see it that way. The point is to figure out what your highest values are and mobilize people around them.

**AQ:** What are your highest values?

**DJB:** The academic integrity of the place, diversity in all senses. Tom Friedman is right that we are in a flat world. Individuals will stand or fall depending upon how much education they have. It's crucial that individuals in a global environment be able to appreciate and revel in and also take advantage of rapid change on a global basis.

**AQ:** But there has to be a defining value beyond academic excellence, because there are a lot of academically excellent institutions out there, as you well know. And yet

they don't feel like Wesleyan. Earlier in your tenure you described a liberal arts education as providing students with *chutzpah*. I wonder if you think, in some sense, that's the defining quality of a Wesleyan student—a kind of a lack of fear, a kind of a daring.

**DJB:** Yes. I wouldn't say that's true only of Wesleyan students, but it comes out of a liberal arts education. We get students who may come in with a little more *chutzpah*. We welcome them and embrace them. We are trying to give them courage and confidence and a sense that they can succeed. They are good risk takers, and they are not intimidated.

**AQ:** Think back to when the trustees first asked you to take this job. What was your biggest misconception about what it would require to be president of Wesleyan?

**DJB:** My *modus operandi* was not to divide people and set them against each other or play politics. Everybody said that other college presidents have a terrible time with their faculty, and boards of trustees never get it. I purposely came in decrying that view as untrue of Wesleyan. We set a new creative context for people working together. To give you a specific example: Our campaign was successful because of excellent staffing, but more important,



Anna Quindlen and Doug Bennet met this fall in his South College office for a wide-ranging discussion.

because of volunteer fundraisers, the board and others, who just did it. That wouldn't have happened if there hadn't been a real sense of solidarity.

**AQ:** So you don't think there is an inherent tension in that tripartite system we have at universities of administration, faculty, and students?

**DJB:** There is an inherent tension, but it can be constructive. The way I put it when I came here is that people say you can't move academic institutions, but I'm sure that's not true of Wesleyan. We've done a lot in some sensitive areas, such as improving the tenure system, and it didn't result in blowups or breakdowns. I think the model that assumes those tensions is flawed.

**AQ:** It's become conventional wisdom that fundraising is the biggest part of your job. In virtually every piece that

has been written about you in recent years, it's been noted that you doubled the endowment, and that you've done some \$220 million in construction. Is fundraising as central to your day-to-day job as people think it is?

**DJB:** I don't think so. Our fundraising works because the institution is credible and has objectives that are well thought out. The way the question frequently comes is, "Do you spend all your time on fundraising?" I do a lot of work that is related. It's not about asking, but about building a case that people will support.

**AQ:** What percentage of your time is spent in student contact?

**DJB:** Sadly, much less, probably 15 percent.

**AQ:** Did that come as a surprise to you when you took the job? Did you envision yourself walking across Foss

Hill, stopping to chat with sophomores and seniors?

**DJB:** Yes. It's my fault, not the fault of sophomores and seniors. But you do have to make choices. I've had to invest a lot of energy in strategic planning and the mobilization we've talked about.

**AQ:** Can you reminisce a little about the day when several hundred students barricaded you in your office in South College? What did they have to say; what did they want?

**DJB:** Their premise was that the administration was not listening to students. They did barricade the office. It was a bad and uncomfortable time. The administration decided it would look at all the student demands, major and minor. We considered them all during the holiday break and published a paper that addressed them, and



“I have known Doug since he became president of Wesleyan. His commitment, dedication, and concern not only for the alumni, students and faculty, but also for the Middletown region, are qualities that I admire.”

—LARRY McHUGH, PRESIDENT, MIDDLESEX COUNTY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

showed that there had been very wide consultation with students. I also felt that I had to make a very clear statement that academic institutions can't decide things in response to pressure. I put out a statement that I hope changed the culture.

**AQ:** Did you see anything righteous about their behavior?

**DJB:** I have trouble seeing anything righteous about it because the premise (failure to consult) was uninformed and force was used. It's not activism that I would endorse.

**AQ:** Do you ever consider, for example, revisiting some of the key students and asking what they thought of the administration's response?

**DJB:** We did have two forums at which we discussed the administration's response.

**AQ:** I would also be remiss if I didn't ask you about the ban on chalking and whether you have any regrets about it.

**DJB:** Absolutely none.

**AQ:** Talk to me about the process that led up to your decision. Was there any one message chalked on a sidewalk that made you say, enough?

**DJB:** Yes is the answer, though I can't remember what it was.

**AQ:** And maybe we can't put it in a family magazine.

**DJB:** The history is that chalking had been used as a way of advertising events; it was not peculiar to Wesleyan. Over time, the messages became more and more politically oriented. Then they became sexually threatening, naming individual professors. At one point I stopped it because of homophobic and racist chalking. Then we tried it again for a while, but it got bad. So we had a moratorium to discuss with the campus why this is not a First Amendment issue. At the end of the moratorium I decided to use my authority to end chalking.

**AQ:** Why isn't it a First Amendment issue?

**DJB:** Because there are other outlets for expression: the Internet, the student newspaper, banners.

**AQ:** And chalking has not returned, right?

**DJB:** We occasionally see a little of it, but we erase it immediately.

**AQ:** What about some of the controversy surrounding Greek life at Wesleyan. Didn't you have to order frats to admit women?

**DJB:** It seemed to me that the fraternities could serve themselves and the campus by being part of the structure of program houses [for students who share interests]. The hitch was that Wesleyan feels, and I feel very strongly, that you don't discriminate against people because of their gender or anything else they're born with. We worked with the fraternities on this and said that if you want to be a fraternity and not admit women, that's fine, but you can't be part of the Wesleyan community and you have to get so-called off-campus housing status. We reduced the number of off-campus slots because we built dormitories. So it became a pointed issue. There was only one house that really had to decide, Psi U, and they decided to admit women. It's important to emphasize that the principle was one of nondiscrimination.

**AQ:** Did you get much blowback from alums about that?

**DJB:** Not too much.

**AQ:** May I ask you about some general hot-button issues in higher education? The first is early decision in admissions. We have a number of the highest profile universities in the country saying they are going to do away with it. Is Wesleyan going to get rid of early decision? Should it?

**DJB:** I have a lot of personal doubts about the desirability of early decision because I think it tends to force kids to make decisions earlier, when later is better at that age. That having been said, there are also reasons why it's helpful to Wesleyan and other institutions to have applicants for whom the school is a first choice. I don't really know the right answer.

**AQ:** Do you buy the argument that it is undemocratic because poorer kids need to compare financial aid pack-

ages and they don't get a chance to do that with ED?

**DJB:** We have need-blind admission, so it's not as big an issue here. If you are dealing with merit scholarships, then that is a factor.

**AQ:** Can you afford to continue need-blind?

**DJB:** We absolutely will. The legitimacy of an elite school almost disappears if you can't get into it for financial reasons.

**AQ:** But even with need-blind, don't we have some issues about the class chasm in higher education? We have students who can pay full freight and the students who can expect to get really substantial scholarship help, and then we have that dwindling middle class that thinks there is no way they can afford a private liberal arts college.

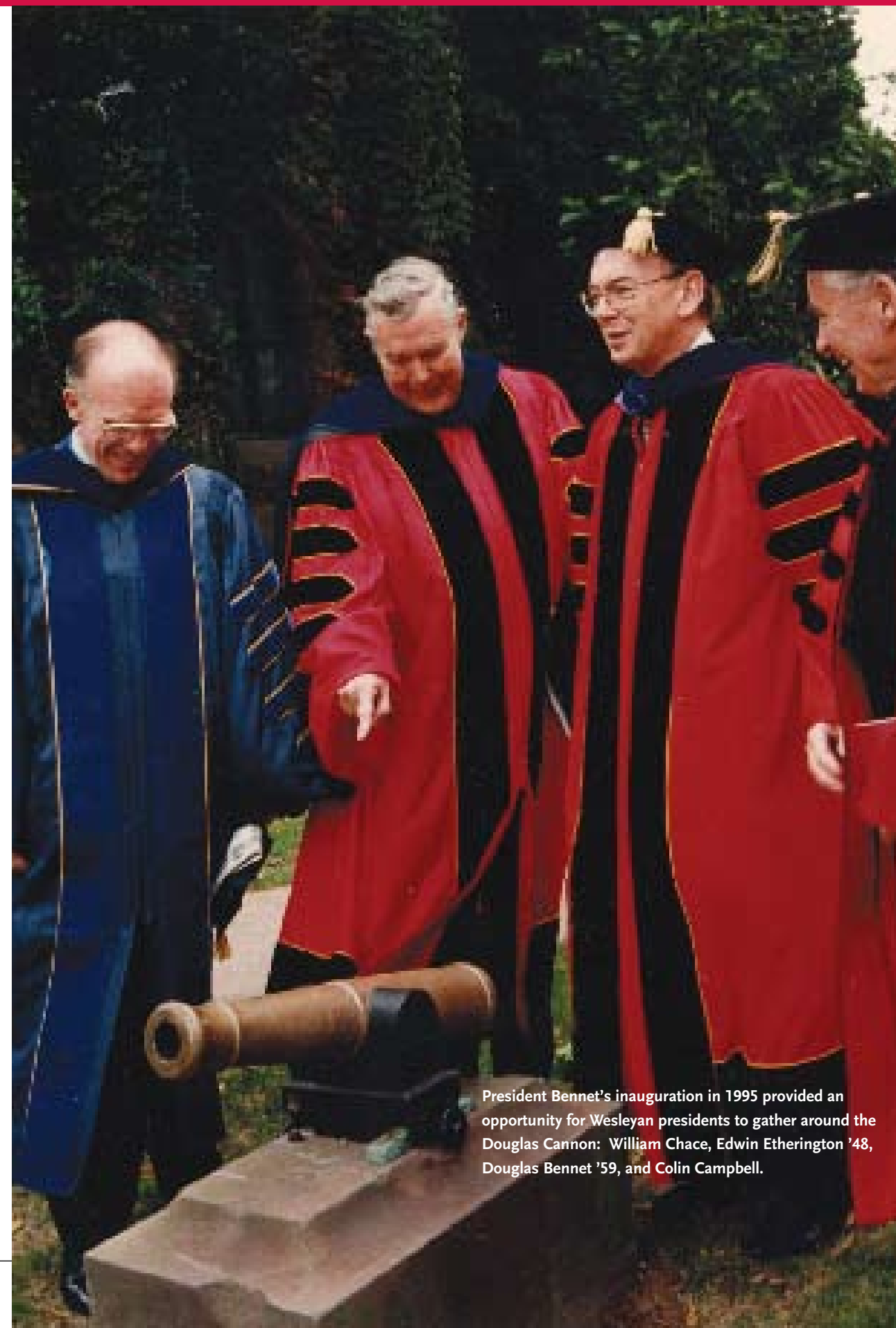
**DJB:** Yes, but I don't think the problem is as absolute as your question suggests. I don't think you will find that Wesleyan is a place where the middle class is missing. Also, the way we organize higher education in this society is that students and families have to pay for some of it. I don't think it's bad that students have the choice of coming here on a need-blind basis, paying if they can, and if not here, then attending a public institution such as the University of Connecticut. The system is not perfect. The real question is whether students can go to college at all. There are a lot who can't because society is not willing to pay for it.

**AQ:** How do you feel about eliminating the SATs for college admission?

**DJB:** It's one of several indicators we have. I don't think they are dispositive. It's not something that we've considered eliminating. The important point is that we try to get the whole picture.

**AQ:** The secretary of education formed a commission to consider the role of government in higher education, especially in terms of assessing how well colleges and universities work. You're a former government official—what should the role of the government be in higher education, if any?

**DJB:** It needs to support public higher education in lots



President Bennet's inauguration in 1995 provided an opportunity for Wesleyan presidents to gather around the Douglas Cannon: William Chace, Edwin Etherington '48, Douglas Bennet '59, and Colin Campbell.

BILL BURKHART

of ways that it's not. The biggest problem is the diminution of state support for public colleges.

**AQ:** The Spellings Commission is suggesting that it might institute an exit test to determine how well students are doing, that it might track all American students to see how long it takes them to complete college. Ought our government to be doing this?

**DJB:** I don't think so, certainly not with private colleges—probably not with anybody because the testing process doesn't give you the data you need. I don't think you can tell with a philosophy student at Wesleyan, for example, whether that person is getting an optimum dose of philosophy or not. It depends totally on surrounding circumstances and life experience. We are producing people who have a broad set of capabilities that are very hard to test.

**AQ:** A lot of colleges and universities seem to be struggling with maintaining student interest in science and math. Is that something that you've targeted at Wesleyan?

**DJB:** We have an unusually strong science program, but it's not widely known. We are number one in federal research grants among top liberal arts colleges and publish far more scholarly articles. We have a big commitment to the sciences, yet not enough students participate; majors in the sciences are maybe 19 percent.

**AQ:** Is that higher than when you first arrived?

**DJB:** No, it's about the same.

**AQ:** What's the challenge? Is there a student perception that it's just too hard? It's not the job of a liberal arts education?

**DJB:** I don't know. We have made some major changes in the freshman science offerings. Although we are doing a much better job of that, it's probably a little too early to see the results. There's a lot of mythology, especially about women—mythology perpetrated by certain of our fellow presidents. It's not right. We have to use the very strong sciences we have and make them an integral part of liberal arts education. That's a work in progress.

**AQ:** You wrote at the end of your fourth year, "Though Wesleyan has prestige, we do not have as much as some other schools that are not stronger than we are academically." Why do you think that is, or was? Has that changed?

**DJB:** I don't think it has. Everything we see suggests that academic excellence and prestige go together.

**AQ:** So what you are saying is that Wesleyan is academ-

ically excellent, but people don't necessarily get that.

**DJB:** It's a direct correlation to the *U.S. News* rankings. We know that when students look at Wesleyan they think it's just as good as anyplace else in terms of its academics—very strong. In head-to-head comparisons with Williams or Amherst, it's just as good, same education, or better. But you then inject the *U.S. News* ranking, which is now 10, and that directly correlates to the prestige.

**AQ:** But 10 is pretty high.

**DJB:** Ten is pretty high, but we know that if you're choosing between a school with a 10 and one with a nine, a substantial number of kids go to the nine even though they may not like it as much as the other one. That is one of the unsolved issues in higher education. I refuse *not* to take the *U.S. News* measures seriously because they are real measures. I don't accept the total score because I think it's a slightly screwy calculation, but each of the elements that they weigh is significant, worth paying attention to.

**AQ:** Do you ever consider not cooperating with them?

**DJB:** It's a dilemma. On the one hand, they have a right to do it. But the net effect for a school like Wesleyan is a real distortion.

**AQ:** But don't you also think that some students think of Williams and Amherst as polo shirts and Wesleyan as a T-shirt with a slogan? Is this an image problem, as opposed to a ranking problem?

**DJB:** Because we thought there was an image problem, we tried to address it by emphasizing what we do here. That, I think, has paid off. Prospective students, for the most part, don't have anything negative to say about Wesleyan's image. But they are still driven by *U.S. News*.

**AQ:** Let me turn that around a little bit. To the extent that Wesleyan is seen as remarkably tolerant and open to diverse types of students, isn't that an affirmative good in our society?

**DJB:** Yes, in my view it's an affirmative good if it's coupled unarguably with academic excellence. What I love about Wesleyan is that all these students who come from many places and don't look the same are just as equipped and just as successful in the classrooms as students in any other school, more successful.

**AQ:** Let me turn to the faculty for a moment. I talked to some faculty members about this interview. I was struck by the enormous amount of affection and respect that they have for you. But—and this is no different than

any other college or university I've known—the faculty feel they get short shrift in this tripartite system. Are you comfortable with where the Wesleyan faculty is sitting in terms of compensation?

**DJB:** No, we're working on that. It needs to go up.

**AQ:** Is there a goal, a plan; is there a capital campaign for faculty salaries?

**DJB:** There was a capital campaign, and some of it went to faculty salaries, some of it went to additional faculty. We're in the process right now of discussing this with the faculty. We have a set of schools we compare ourselves to for compensation and pensions. We're not horribly far behind.

**AQ:** And what about tenure? If you had your druthers, would you make tenure disappear?

**DJB:** No, because I think its fundamental point is critical today for academic freedom and protecting people's freedom of inquiry in the Spellings era. Not to put it all on her, but at a time when part of national policy is to figure out ways to interfere with higher education, I'm very glad that we have the protection of the tenure system. The second thing I would say is that I've found it a cumbersome system because you have to have a lot of people in the decision-making process, which has to be a discreet secret. It's hard to get that done consistently. But in terms of the output, we have hired 50 percent of the faculty during the last 10 years. Many of these are going through the tenure process now and the results are excellent. I think the system works.

**AQ:** Are you happy with the diversity of your faculty?

**DJB:** No, it's something we have to keep after, but it's better. We're not having anywhere near the turnover that we once did. It's asking a lot of a department that is going to recruit one person over the next five years to know where the candidates of color are, but we ask it. We insist that the roster of candidates be diverse, even though it's not easily done.

**AQ:** Certain boards seem to try to creep into the administrative function and certain presidents seem to try to influence their boards more than others. Where do you see the line being drawn?

**DJB:** This board had done a lot of homework before I was hired. They had decided upon standards of practice they wanted to adhere to. I can't think of cases in which I thought the board was limiting or interfering. I hope I've done the presidential role well. Part of that role is to

structure issues for the board to consider and to respond to observations or ideas that they have. It's been an excellent relationship.

**AQ:** Can you walk me through the events and the thought processes that led you to say one day: "It's time for me to finish up here."

**DJB:** I'm not sure that I know them all. I love the job. I felt very successful at it, but the institution needs continuing leadership for another 12 years. My hope is that Wesleyan can find someone who will have as much fun with it as I have and lead Wesleyan for an indefinite period.

**AQ:** Every time I've heard you talk about your job, you've used the word "fun." I've got a quote here from a newspaper story in which you used it, I've heard you use it two times in speeches, and you've just used it again. What's fun about this job?

**DJB:** Everything is fun about it. It's a good cause. I enjoy disproving the mythology about it, disproving the conventional wisdom about how you can't possibly have decent relationships with your faculty.

**AQ:** What are the other myths about higher education in general and about Wesleyan, particularly?

**DJB:** The assertion that curricula are always out of date. Not so. Our scholars are teaching at the edge of their fields. Ones about the fundraising, that it takes all your time. It's terrible if it's true, but it hasn't been true of us. Instead of doing what a lot of schools do and pulling back after a campaign, we're actually increasing our investment in fundraising by a lot. This will produce an even larger return.

**AQ:** What about all these new buildings. Do college presidents have an edifice complex?

**DJB:** I certainly didn't. I came here totally un-edifice-complexed.

**AQ:** You weren't ready to build the moment you hit the ground? What happened?

**DJB:** The chapel started losing its bricks. Somebody came in one day and reported that he'd been examining the roof on '92 Theater and was able to look under a parapet; he saw no mortar at all. The parapet could have fallen on someone. So that's where it started. We then decided that we could and should produce new dormitories and the university center. We created a facilities plan. We got some good outside advice on that. The plan is not a straightjacket, but it inspires confidence that we really

“My board oversight responsibility was development. Doug recognized very early on what an important priority this was. At times during that year I would call South College and find he was working in the development office. This was the beginning of the highly successful and peer-competitive development program Wesleyan has today.”

—ROBERT McKELVEY '59, TRUSTEE EMERITUS

thought about our reasons for putting the university center in the middle of campus. It was important to show that we can make decisions and implement them on a cost-effective basis. Our new buildings have all come in on budget and on schedule.

**AQ:** Doesn't a new building have a symbolic value, too, in that it speaks of the future, and not the past?

**DJB:** That's right, which probably makes some people nervous. One of the buildings we restored completely is the chapel. It had been completely unused and is now a lovely space. The master plan created a domino effect—building the campus center meant you had to get rid of the Cage, which meant that we had to enlarge the athletic center.

**AQ:** I've been reading a new publication about college presidents from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. It says in part, "No leader comes to personify an institution in the way a university president does." So, do you personify Wesleyan? What do you tell us about Wesleyan, just by showing up and being yourself?

**DJB:** I'd have to examine that assertion; I'm not very comfortable with it.

**AQ:** For yourself, or in general?

**DJB:** In general. It personalizes the leadership function that should be expressed and measured in institutional terms. It could be read as saying that for good or ill, the most important thing you are looking for in a president is the person who will represent this institution as it is today rather than as it needs to grow and change.

**AQ:** I'm not necessarily sure if this is true, but there's always discussion about how college presidents used to use the bully pulpit to give speeches about the issues of the day: war and peace, the economy, affirmative action, the role of women. People argue that's not true anymore because they can't afford to alienate their donors. Do you think that's true?

**DJB:** I wish that I had been more vocal on national issues than I have been. With my background, that would

have seemed like a reasonable possibility. It is not, however, the alienation of donors that's of concern; it's a self-imposed constraint that has more to do with the choices I made about work. I didn't choose to take the time to sit down and address these national issues.

**AQ:** You sound as though you have some regrets.

**DJB:** I wonder if I could have been more effective in the bully pulpit. But I had to choose where to direct my attention.

**AQ:** You may feel that you've already answered this, but I think each of us sometimes says, "I wish I were better at X." What was X for you? Over 12 years, was there one thing about which you often said, "If only I were a little better at...?" Clearly, it can't have been fundraising. Clearly, it can't have been administration.

**DJB:** I think we're on to it. I do think about contributing as an American during a desperate time in the country. I hope to be able to do some of that when I leave here. Working with nonprofits, or something.

**AQ:** What are you going to do when you leave here?

**DJB:** I don't know yet. There are two areas that I'm very concerned about; the question is how you get leverage. This is a moment when nonprofit activity is going to be burgeoning, partly because there is a lot more money. One area of interest is international issues, the war, and economic development topics with which I have some familiarity. The other is that I continue to mourn the quality of journalism, present company excepted. It's really serious. I don't know what we can do about it. It's going downhill. I've looked at that from the NPR perspective, and I know that doesn't have to be the case.

**AQ:** Any lessons in running NPR that were immediately transferable to Wesleyan?

**DJB:** Freedom of speech and academic freedom were transferable.

**AQ:** The tone? Intellectual?

**DJB:** Yes. Education of high quality assumes that there is a constituency for inquiry of the very highest quality.

**AQ:** Your most challenging decision while you were

here? What kept you up nights, staring at the ceiling? Or do you sleep well?

**DJB:** I sleep very well. The agonizing moments come when students get hit by cars and die. You have to call their parents, and that's tough.

**AQ:** At some level this job is not about academic freedom, and not about building new buildings, and not about raising money, it's about overseeing other people's children.

**DJB:** Or supporting them.

**AQ:** Does that strike you with particular ferocity at a moment when you are walking on High Street? Or is it with you all the time?

**DJB:** I find myself saying "protect, protect, protect" when I'm walking around. My job is to protect.

**AQ:** The students and the institution?

**DJB:** Mostly the students, and the institution.

**AQ:** The harshest criticism you've had from an alum?

**DJB:** Usually it's something to do with my inability to deal with sports. I've now corrected that, too. I can give you a very precise answer to this. There was an early contest between the dance department and me. The dance department threatened to sue me because I had relieved the chair of the department of her duties.

**AQ:** Because?

**DJB:** Because of unwillingness to do something of a personnel nature. This was pretty early in my tenure. At some point in that process, disaffected alumni hired a biplane with a streamer to fly over Commencement. I couldn't see it, but everybody else was looking up at it. It denounced me. It said something about "Fire Bennet."

**AQ:** That seems quite Wesleyan to me.

**DJB:** It's a lot of expense for an airplane.

**AQ:** Okay, let's pretend that I've just been named president of Wesleyan, which by the way would make me the first woman president of Wesleyan.

**DJB:** The opportunity is now.

**AQ:** Give me some good advice that no one else will be able to provide for me.





After he leaves South College, President Bennet may have more time for a favorite activity—sailing.

MIDGE BOWEN BENNET

“When I chaired the outside review committee for [Wesleyan’s] 2002 reaccreditation, I witnessed firsthand what a remarkably effective leader Doug Bennet has been. When confronted with a problem, Doug instinctively reaches for the moral high ground and the learning opportunity. This president, recruited from outside higher education, has proven to be the quintessential educator’s educator.”

—DIANA CHAPMAN WALSH, PRESIDENT, WELLESLEY COLLEGE

**DJB:** It has to do with leadership style, the components of leadership, and your credibility as a leader. I don’t think there is a uniform standard, which is a good thing because then you wouldn’t have any college presidents at all. Have confidence in the institution. Don’t manipulate the institution, and be as open as you possibly can be. It’s contagious.

**AQ:** What would you tell me about the typical Wesleyan student?

**DJB:** Wesleyan students are extremely motivated. They will do something different in their education than they thought they would do when they came in, both with regard to studies and their role in life. They need a little bit, not a great deal, of reassurance about how to connect to get outcomes they want. This in the context of a college where if people think there is an ill in the world, they simply establish a 501(c)(3) to deal with it. I think the issue of how you act, or act effectively as an entrepreneur or for social purposes, is a big open question at this point.

**AQ:** Do you feel that they are particularly idealistic in the world of higher education?

**DJB:** Yes, they are idealistic, although I don’t know how to measure that against others. The trick is to be sure that they believe they can apply idealism effectively.

**AQ:** If you got to spend next year as a Wesleyan student, what courses would you take?

**DJB:** Perhaps start again in Russian history.

**AQ:** Which was your area of study when you were here, correct?

**DJB:** It’s actually not a facetious answer. I’ve been looking at my library, which is a ragtag collection of things from various lives because my career has been varied. I’ve decided that in retirement I’m simply going to read them from A to Z.

**AQ:** So, Russian history. Anything that you never would have thought of taking when you were an undergraduate that you would take now?

**DJB:** You mean something like dance?

**AQ:** I don’t know. Given that airplane banner, are you welcome in the dance department?

**DJB:** Certainly.

**AQ:** You are a pretty dignified guy, but I have never heard anybody on this campus—faculty, administrator, or student—refer to you as President Bennet. Every single person I’ve ever run into has called you Doug. What does that tell me about your leadership style?

**DJB:** Well, it’s absolutely wonderful. It’s something that I love. It does suggest there is affection and common purpose—not always and people get mad at me sometimes. The part that’s going to be hard is not having the students around every day. I live nearby. After a discreet interval I’ll come and hang around.

**AQ:** When you are not Doug, you are Doug’n’Midge. It’s one word. Can you just talk a bit about what you asked your wife to do as the spouse of a college president and what she did on her own? There has been so much of a morphing of the role of the spouse of a college president, particularly with more women becoming college presidents. And yet, there is the very powerful sense of Doug’n’Midge as a single entity.

**DJB:** I think that’s true. We’re uniquely positioned, or happily positioned. We were married after I came here. I’ve sometimes wondered what the board could possibly have been thinking when they hired this aging bachelor. She has had as much satisfaction as I’ve had. She’s been a player in almost everything. The “almost” is a very important point, though. You don’t include your spouse in senior staff, which means there are things that come in over the transom where she’s not there at the beginning. The affection we have for each other is possibly reassuring to people. We go everywhere together.

**AQ:** You had a serious illness during your presidency, right?

**DJB:** Yes.

**AQ:** Did that affect your decision to leave at this moment? How did that affect your ability to do your job, and

did it give you any new perspective on it?

**DJB:** My decision to leave was not affected by my illness, which was a prostate cancer, and I’m totally cured. It does give you the reminder that as you get to be older, things break. That’s a factor; you want to spend more time sailing or squeezing grandchildren. It was not a particularly onerous treatment compared to what most people go through. Still, I think I kidded myself into thinking that I was simply going to dominate it, and it took longer to recover than I thought it would.

**AQ:** Did you think about joining the faculty?

**DJB:** No, I haven’t. That’s an interesting question. I’ve tried to maintain a clear line with the faculty. I might love to do some serious research, but it’s important to maintain that separation.

**AQ:** You started off talking about academics, and I wanted to ask you what educational initiative you’re most proud of during your presidency.

**DJB:** It was this process I went through producing a paper called “Wesleyan Education for the 21st Century.” We asked how you define a curriculum these days. The answer is that you don’t have a set curriculum with Greek history, but there is a way to decide what capabilities people need when they leave here, so the whole curriculum is being reorganized to reflect those capabilities. The theory is that you can study almost anything as long as you are picking up these capabilities. Russian history might be as good for ethics as anything else.

**AQ:** You’ve been a Wesleyan son, a Wesleyan student, a Wesleyan parent, and a Wesleyan president. Which was best?

**DJB:** President was certainly best. My undergraduate education was wonderful, but it took place in a totally different world, a school of 700 boys running around. I’m happy about each of those periods in my life.

*Anna Quindlen is a columnist for Newsweek and a best-selling novelist. She is chair of the board at Barnard College and, above all, mother of Christopher Krovatin ’07.*