

A New Beginning Through the eyes of the Staten Island Advance

Community welcomes Wagner president



Dr. Norman R. Smith and his wife, Dr. Susan Robinson, at left, talk with Susan Lamberti and Borough President Ralph J. Lamberti at the reception.

By ANN MARIE BRESLIN
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Members of the Wagner College community joined civic leaders and Borough President Ralph J. Lamberti last night in Borough Hall to welcome the school's new president, Dr. Norman R. Smith, and his wife to the community and to praise a blossoming partnership.

"I have said before that Wagner College must reach out to the community, be a part of it. I did not make that speech to you, Dr. Smith," Lamberti said in a welcoming speech before nearly 100 guests.

"I couldn't believe that every event I was going to, you were there before me," he said with a laugh. Smith and his wife, Dr. Susan Robinson, came to Staten Island seven months ago when he was appointed Wagner's 17th president, replacing Dr. Sam Frank, who resigned a year and a half ago after serving six years.

"There's a real partnership present which makes this a very special place," Smith said earlier in the evening. "That's what we are with Staten Island — partners."

Smith and his wife both praised Staten Island's civic leaders for their efforts of welcome and assistance. "The spirit of support I've received from the borough president has been a key to my energies," Smith said during a conversation just outside the reception area.

"It's not a job you can do alone, and Wagner, in my judgment, has the potential to be a nationally visible symbol for Staten Island," he added.

The talk throughout the evening was of the optimism brought by Smith to the Grymes Hill college, recently beset by financial problems stemming from declining enrollment.

"You came to our borough with enthusiasm and

excitement we haven't seen in some time," Lamberti said as guests shook their heads in agreement.

"He's energized the entire faculty," said Dr. Eleanor Rogg, Wagner's acting vice president for academic affairs, over Irish coffee. Dr. Rogg said Smith has made a name for himself by the changes he's made in the physical plant, academic areas and admissions.

"It's going swimmingly. He's given people a sense of the fact that it can be done," said the Rev. Thomas F. Mugavero, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, Stapleton, and a member of the college's board of trustees.

Howard G. Meyers, vice chairman of the board of trustees, agreed, saying Smith has brought long-awaited action to the small liberal arts college.

"The difference is that we're not talking about the problems anymore. We're addressing them in a very real way," he said, adding that Smith has made an impact on the community through his contacts with it. "People are thinking there really is something to Wagner College."

Throughout the reception, conversations about current events, cocktails and the entertainment, a trio from the Jewish Community Center's Music Institute. But the talk always rolled around to Smith, who holds a doctorate in education from Harvard University and comes to Wagner from Moore College of Art in Philadelphia, where he was vice president and supervised administrative operations.

"We're here tonight to tell Wagner College's new president and his wife we open our arms to you. We welcome you to our town," Lamberti said.

Norman Smith came on campus like a strong, fresh breeze on a smotheringly hot summer's day. He revived the life, rallied the troops, gave new hope and beautified the campus and the immediate neighborhood.

Wagner indeed has a leader again. Tough problems remain and dog him, but he has wiped away fears that they won't be overcome.

Les Trautmann, Editor
of the Staten Island Advance

New Wagner optimism credited to Smith

By DON GROSS
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

Wagner College's new president, Norman R. Smith, seems to have taken the Grymes Hill campus by storm and sparked an infectious optimism about the school's ability to rout the financial problems that have beset it for the past several years.

An informal survey of faculty, non-teaching staff and students over the past three months shows a complete elimination of the air of pessimism that pervaded the 106-year-old school at the end of the 1987-88 school year. Student leaders and professors then not only questioned the school's leadership, but whether the school could survive.

Smith has also served as a healer, drawing together factions that only last year were fighting bitterly as the school went through a turbulent search for a new president.

In interview after interview, Smith was singled out as the cause of the sudden burst of hope and commitment energizing the campus.

Egon Wendel, chairman of the school's education department said "there's no doubt" that the changed atmosphere was emanat-

ing directly from the president. Smith, he said, has spread "a lot of good will" on the campus.

According to Wendel, Smith was keeping the faculty fully "aware of what's going on in the administration."

Dr. Eleanor Rogg, the acting vice president for academic affairs, said Smith more than makes himself available for faculty and student input, he seeks it out.

"He's almost never in his office," she said. "He's out walking around the campus, stopping people and talking to them."

Student government association president Joseph Watson said he had seen Smith stop students to simply ask their names and find out if they were satisfied with the school's new food service or their dormitory accommodations.

This concern with what others think and feel about the college, Ms. Rogg said, has released a current of energy as everyone pitches in to help the school.

During recent renovations of the Wagner dorms, a focal point of student complaints about the school last year, school administrators were seen splashing paint on the walls while contractors installed new tile in the showers in order to meet tight deadlines.

"It was like a dam burst," she said. "Everyone had ideas that just came pouring out."

"He challenges us," she said. An example of the demands placed on the staff came at the outset of Smith's official tenure in July when he ordered the massive rehabilitation of all areas used by students within 60 days.

Student government president Watson said the efforts to improve student housing were immediately noticed — and appreciated.

One faculty member told of yet another angle. He was told Smith wanted to meet with him, so he suggested 11 a.m. "Oh," he was told, "that's when he will be fundraising on Wall Street." A time shortly after lunch was arranged.

Smith also appointed two faculty members — Ms. Rogg, who headed the sociology-anthropology department, and Joseph D. Smith (no relation), an associate professor of religious studies — to interim administrative positions left open when dean of admissions James Keating and Haaland resigned. Joseph D. Smith and Ms. Rogg will serve until permanent replacements are found by search committees.



Norman R. Smith

ADVANCE PHOTO: FRANK J. JOHNS

When Norman Smith announced Ms. Rogg's appointment to the administrative post, he noted that one of his reasons was her ability to serve as a bridge between faculty factions. "My loyalty has been to the college as an institution," she said.

Both Joseph Smith and Ms. Rogg say they are not interested in holding administrative offices permanently. Yet both also see their new duties as a challenge.

Ms. Rogg said she hopes to institute several new academic programs that will help re-establish the school's academic reputation.

Joseph Smith, in the meantime, has hired an entirely new admissions staff that is actively going out to high schools recruiting prospective students.

But even those professors not playing an active role in the college's renewal say the mood has improved.

Artist Athos Zacharias said his contact with the new president has been infrequent, but meaningful.

"I believe he's going to be very good for the college," he said.