

Graduating with honors

■ Dr. Norman Smith, Wagner College's longest-serving president, bids a fond farewell during emotional commencement exercises at the Grymes Hill campus

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The man credited with turning a little-known college in debt into one of the country's notable liberal arts institutions, bade farewell to Wagner College yesterday at his 15th and final commencement exercises.

On a sun-soaked morning, Dr. Norman Smith, Wagner's longest-serving president, conferred degrees on 546 graduates in the grassy center of the campus. He, along with his wife, Dr. Susan Robinson, and Dr. John Myers, were awarded Doctor of Humane Letters honorary degrees.

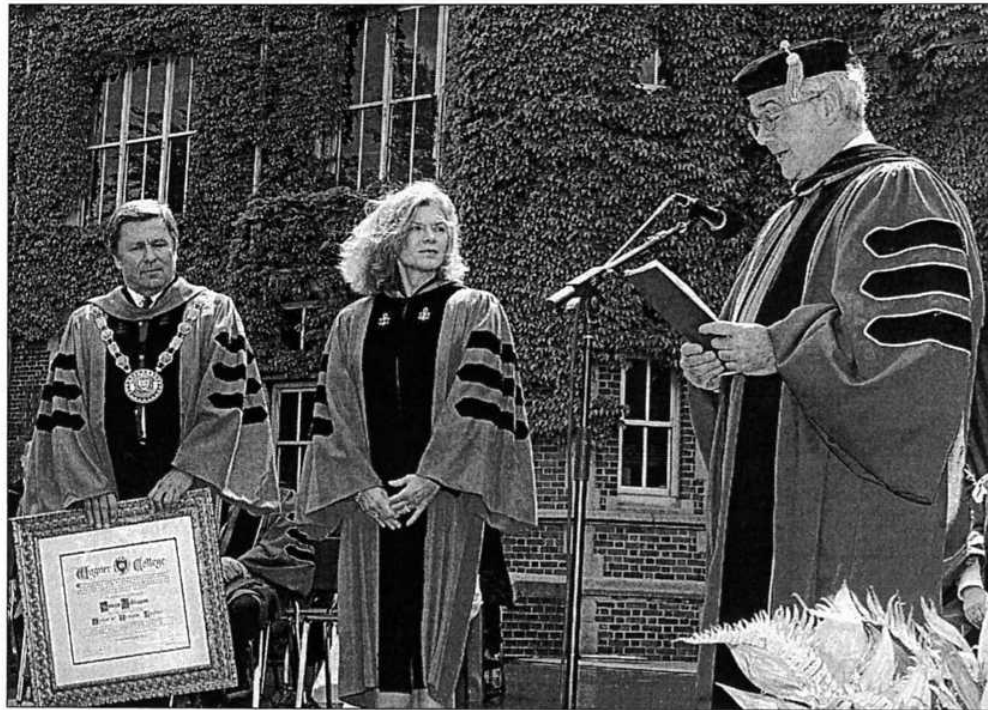
"I am thrilled to finally be an alumnus of Wagner College," Smith told graduates, who were clad in black robes. "For you it took four years, for me it took over 14 years," he joked.

Smith arrived at Wagner in 1988 at age 41, when the Grymes Hill school's main lawn was void of grass because the football team used it as a practice field. Enrollment stood at about 1,200, hundreds below capacity, and the average SAT score for incoming students was 800.

Today the institution boasts first-class facilities, a more distinguished faculty and a student body of greater geographic diversity. Enrollment swelled to over 2,000 pupils and the average SAT score for applicants rose to 1140. Wagner was recently cited by Time magazine as one of the four most notable liberal arts colleges in America for 2002 for first-year programs.

Graduate Kimberly Almeida, hailing from Chilistown, R.I., selected Wagner because of its proximity to Manhattan and rising reputation. The marketing major hasn't decided if she will remain in the city or return home to pursue her career.

"We're not sure where there's more opportunities," said her mother, Jo-Ann. "I think the econ-



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ IRVING SILVERSTEIN

Dr. Norman Smith, outgoing Wagner College president, and Dr. Susan Robinson, his wife and a former dean at the school, receive honorary degrees. Speaking is Dr. Robert O'Brien, board chairman.

omy is actually on an [upswing]."

And from Montana came class speaker Kinsey Casey, who described her class as the guinea pigs for many of the changes at Wagner. Departments were rearranged during their college careers, the credit system was revamped and even the breakfast plan was overhauled.

Part of the legacy Smith leaves is his ability to harness financial support. During his tenure, well-heeled alumni such as Donald and Evelyn Spiro donated generously toward the construction of \$12 million sports center named for them. Patrons like Margaret "Peggy" Reynolds made other improvements possible, said Smith.

The outgoing president, who will assume the head post at Richmond, The American International University in London, in the fall, urged Wagner graduates to become the next generation of contributors.

"Don't let go of this institution," said Smith. "From the day I got here I said, 'This can be one of the great ones.' We are well on our way."

After Smith thanked students for letting him be a part of their experience, the graduates responded with the first in a series of standing ovations for him.

Minutes earlier, his wife choked back tears as she received her honorary degree.

During her decade as associate provost and dean of admissions at Wagner, Dr. Robinson was responsible for redesigning the marketing plan that brought enrollment to capacity and raised the standards of admission. She left Wagner in 1999 to become the first female president of Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Livingston.

Like her husband, she encouraged students to strengthen their bonds to Wagner. "It isn't simply getting a paycheck that should be your next goal," she advised. Graduates must think about qualitative ways to give back to organizations, said Dr. Robinson.

"Wagner will never leave my heart," she said, her voice cracking. "I will be keeping an eye on you, a very loving eye."

The third honorary degree recipient, Dr. Myers, a 1967 Wagner alumnus, touched on how the world has changed since Sept. 11 and reflected on the values his parents' generation instilled in the country. Earlier, a moment of silence was observed for victims of the World Trade Center attack.

"I was a product of the 'Greatest Generation,'" said Dr. Myers, referring to newsman Tom

Brokaw's description of the young men and women of World War II. The tragic events of Sept. 11 united the country in a way his own generation had never seen. "You have the opportunity to become our nation's next-greatest generation," he told graduates.

He named leveling economic inequality, facing global warming, and making community service a standard responsibility as some of the challenges that lie ahead.

For many, the economic downturn will also be one of the challenges.

But with cameras and flowers in hand, parents expressed confidence yesterday in their children's abilities to land plum jobs.

Wagner graduate Lisa Ninnivaggio of West Islip, L.I., who earned her master's in business administration, wants to work in the financial aid area of higher education. Her mother, Charlette Ninnivaggio, said the sluggish economy could be good news for her daughter. "Enrollment is up at colleges, so they'll need people in financial aid."

Justin Rosenberg of Willowbrook will begin work for a pharmaceutical company on Monday. Family friend, Dr. Leah Henry-Beauchamp, said graduates like the chemistry buff should expect to see a brightening job market.