

# Wagner says goodbye to its renaissance man

■ During a farewell ceremony, Dr. Norman Smith receives the title of president emeritus after his 14-year tenure at the Grymes Hill college

By STEPHANIE SLEPIAN  
ADVANCE STAFF WRITER

There once was a time when Wagner College was near financial ruin — and it showed.

Its sidewalks were cracked, the grass was in need of some greening and its academic reputation was on the line.

That was before Norman Smith. Today, Wagner College is home to brick walkways, a luscious lawn and a student body that has caught the attention of Time magazine.

This is after Norman Smith. On the Grymes Hill campus, "Before Norman Smith" and "After Norman Smith" are catch phrases — the only way to describe Wagner's renaissance under his 14-year tenure as president.

Yesterday, Dr. Smith became the first person in the 119-year history of the college to receive the title of president emeritus.

This time next week, Dr. Smith, his wife, Dr. Susan Robinson, and their 10-year-old daughter, Caroline, will be settling into a new home at a new university in England. Dr. Robinson is the former president and CEO of Snug Harbor Cultural Center and former associate provost and dean of admissions at the college.

In the fall, Dr. Smith will assume the presidency of the American International University in London.

But Wagner will never be far from their hearts.

"We have spent so much time focusing on our excitement about where we are going because we don't want to face how much we are leaving," Dr. Smith said yesterday to close to 400 of his supporters who came to say goodbye and good luck. "It is a day like today that reminds us of the downsides of what we are doing."

Gathered under a tent on the grassy oval in front of Wagner's distinctive Main Hall, speaker after speaker took the microphone to praise Dr. Smith for the seeds he has planted since his arrival as president in 1988.

"When Norman Smith came in 1988, the Good Ship Wagner was floundering in murky seas," said Dr. Robert Anderson, the college's longest serving faculty member.

Fourteen years later, Wagner is steaming ahead and charting a course of success with enrollment



ADVANCE PHOTO ■ JOSHUA CARP

Wagner College's outgoing president, Dr. Norman Smith, second from right, joined by his daughter, Caroline, right, and his wife, Dr. Susan Robinson, left, is presented with the title of president emeritus by Dr. Margaret B. Reynolds and Dr. Robert O'Brien, a trustee and director of the board of trustees at the college, respectively, during a farewell ceremony at the Grymes Hill campus.

topping 2,000 and SAT scores shooting past the 1100 mark.

The college has been cited as one of the four most notable liberal arts colleges in America in 2002 for first-year programs by Time magazine and logged a fourth consecutive year as one of U.S. News and World Report's "top tier" regional colleges.

In 1988, enrollment stood at 1,200 and the average SAT score for an incoming freshman was a lackluster 800.

"[Dr. Smith] inherited a campus that was unkempt and an institution on the verge of financial collapse," said Dr. Donald Spiro, chairman emeritus of the board of trustees who, along with his wife, donated \$12 million toward the construction of the athletic center in their name.

"Norman knew what an unpolished gem Wagner was and he immediately turned his vision into reality," Dr. Spiro continued.

Dr. Smith's journey to Wagner began in 1971 when he was hired as an assistant dean of students at Drexel University in Philadelphia, where he earned a bachelor of science degree and a master's in business administration. He received a doctorate from Harvard University.

During his career in higher education, he served as executive vice president at Moore College of Art and vice president/dean of student affairs at Philadelphia University. Before arriving at Wagner, Dr. Smith was an assistant dean of the Harvard

Graduate School of Education and assistant dean at Harvard's newly established John F. Kennedy School of Government.

In 1988, Dr. Smith joined the Wagner family as its 17th president and went on to become its longest serving leader.

Throughout the three-hour reception in Dr. Smith's honor, Wagner's new president, Dr. Richard Guarasci, stood quietly in the shadows, allowing the crowd to reflect on the accomplishments of his predecessor.

"Dr. Smith stands as a monument of those who have been most respected and influential in the entire history of Wagner College," said retired Surrogate Charles D'Arrigo, a former trustee.

While heartfelt and at times tearful, the tribute to Dr. Smith was not without a lot of laughs, including those brought on by Ed Burke, who finally placed the blame for Howard Avenue's multiple traffic lights where it belongs.

Soon after Dr. Smith took over, he became concerned about the safety of the students crossing busy Howard Avenue. So he called upon Burke, a 1980 Wagner graduate who serves as executive assistant to the borough president.

As any good alumnus would do, Burke brought representatives from the city Department of Transportation to the site for a study and up went light No. 1 at Campus Road — not exactly where Dr. Smith wanted it.

"He called me up so animated because they were putting the light up in the wrong place," recalled Burke. "I called DOT, but they told me once it's in, it has to stay." A second DOT study resulted in the installation of a second light.

"Don't ask for a roundabout when you get to England because I am afraid you will wind up with two roundabouts," Burke laughed as he cautioned Dr. Smith.

Dr. Robert C. O'Brien, chairman of the board of trustees, who emceed the event, summed up the feelings of everyone standing under the tent: "Thank you for a wonderful and amazing 14 years."

From a platform with a banner proclaiming "Cherio! Norman, Susan and Caroline," Dr. Smith thanked his colleagues for guiding him through the last 14 years.

"All I can say is, keep your eyes on this place for me," he said. "Together, you can take this place into the stratosphere. Keep your hearts, souls and hands on this place. We are going to miss you so much."

As the tributes came to an end, crowds gathered around Dr. Smith and his family for a final farewell.

"When London comes your way and you are my age, you say London may never come again," the 56-year-old former president said following the ceremony. "As much as I love this place, I would always wonder what it would be like if I didn't go. I've got to do this, but I am going to miss this place big time."