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Saint Louis University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J., and I have just walked back into his office after a hurried lunchtime interview, and in no time at all, three members of his staff have gathered around his desk.

I’m still trying to ask some questions for this story celebrating his 20-year anniversary as president, but there is immediate business that demands his attention — letters to sign, meeting agendas to adjust and a stack of phone messages to return. Still, I keep firing questions at him, hanging onto the few minutes I supposedly have left. But it’s hard to get a word in. He wants to answer me (I think). But he is back in his world now, busy and focused, and I know that the interview is over.

It really comes as no surprise. Biondi is very much in demand. He routinely speaks to groups on and off campus, he travels to visit donors and alumni clubs across the country, and he averages 25 meetings a week. Because most of his meals are really meetings spent discussing the University, it’s no exaggeration to say he eats and breathes SLU.

This interview was no different. We met at a new Mexican restaurant on campus named for one of Biondi’s dogs, Iggy. We both ordered the “Biondi Burrito.” (How could he resist? And, frankly, how could I?) It didn’t take long before we were interrupted several times. First by students who wanted to know if he came up with the recipe for the burrito. (No.) Then by the restaurant owner. Then by some SLU staff members dining nearby. When we finally got up to head back to DuBourg Hall, Biondi noticed the owners of the nearby Coronado apartments across the room, so he promptly went over to say hello.

Because he can’t talk to everyone personally (though he sure tries), here’s a candid conversation with Biondi about his 20 years at Saint Louis University.
How have you personally changed?
How have you personally changed? [Jim Collins]. In it there is an analogy of getting the right passengers hasn’t changed. The bus hasn’t changed. My job of so everybody can do his or her job and get the bus moving in the right direction. You may not know the direction for the first few miles, but eventually you’ll figure it out as everybody starts to collaborate, contribute and determine the direction. SLU’s like that. The bus hasn’t changed. My job of getting the right passengers hasn’t changed. But sometimes our routes do vary.

How have you personally changed?
Well, my physical changes are evident — I’ve got less hair, more wrinkles and a few extra pounds. I have less energy, and I can’t get excited about small problems anymore. I’ve grown more patient with people. I don’t like to have them solved, of course, but in the long-term strategic plan, so that when I leave and when they leave, something is left that will continue to attract quality students. I look at this as an investment. All this building we’re going through right now — that’s an investment for the year 2010 and beyond. You can’t think about just the here and now. It’s a strategic investment in the University to maintain it and to strengthen its reputation.

University

President

SLU

SLU's

The Edward A. Doisy Research Center and the growth in our student body, and the success of our faculty and staff, are evident in our financial records. The University is not only articulated well, but the financial resources have improved significantly. I think that’s the most important change that has been made in recent years, as well as the successful financial planning and budgeting that have helped us to continue to grow and expand.

What have been your biggest successes?
I’m proud of many things. In particular, I’m pleased with our higher academic standards and reputation, our $775 million endowment as well as the impressive credentials of our faculty and staff. Our Madrid campus is one of the premier programs in Europe. And overall campus beautification — though I hesitate to focus on that — has really transformed our campus life for our students.

What, if anything, do you wish you could redo?
I don’t think in those terms. You take 15 steps forward and fall back three, but you’re still ahead. I make decisions with information and counsel and advice from others. If 80 percent are good decisions, then I believe that I have succeeded.

France, the University of Paris had a profound effect on me, and I’m glad that it did.

Lawrence Biondi, S.J., has been president of Saint Louis University longer than SLU’s current freshmen have been alive. While he’s been at SLU, four U.S. presidents have served the nation, five governors have served Missouri and four mayors have served St. Louis.

During those 20 years, Saint Louis University has undergone many changes. Most obviously, the physical campus has grown and greened. But it’s the improvements you can’t show on a map that really show the impact of Biondi’s presidency.


texts that we’ve passed is a credibility gap for the University at all levels. In terms of financing, Standard and Poor’s, Moody’s and Fitch’s have acknowledged that we have a very good debt ratio to our endowment.

We set goals, and we accomplish them. For example, we’ve been able to raise the funds we needed for the Doisy Research Center and Chaifetz Arena, and we did. We’re very credible.

What, if anything, do you wish you could redo?
I don’t think in those terms. You take 10 steps forward and fall back three, but you’re still ahead. I make decisions with information and counsel and advice from others. If 80 percent are good decisions, then I believe that I have succeeded.

Although not a reto, I am disappointed that being president prevents me from having more contact with students. I miss those relationships. But there are only so many hours in a day, and I have to devote my time to what will bring about the greatest change. I simply have to make choices. It’s hard for our students to understand this.

Students come and go in four years. What I try to do is invest in their future, in the long-term strategic plan, so that when I leave and when they leave, something is left that will continue to attract quality students. I look at this as an investment.

All this building we’re going through right now — that’s an investment for the year 2010 and beyond. You can’t think about just the here and now. It’s a strategic investment in the University to maintain it and to strengthen its reputation.

So growing the endowment also is very important. Building up SLU’s tradition and culture of values and ethical behavior is important. Building up our SLU tradition and culture of values and ethical behavior is also important, as it continues to attract highly qualified and committed people to teach and learn.

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We’ve set goals, and we accomplish them. For example, we’ve been able to raise the funds we needed for the Doisy Research Center and Chaifetz Arena, and we did. We’re very credible.

What if you could do it over again?
I’m not sure I would change anything. I think I would do it in the same way. I think I would do it in the same way.

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We didn’t ask his favorite color, but we did want to know what makes University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J., tick. So here’s a revealing glimpse of the man behind the collar.

For one day I’d like to trade places with: Pope Benedict XVI
If I couldn’t have my present job, I’d love to be the: Owner of a Tuscan, Lucchese cuisine restaurant in Midtown St. Louis
My dream vacation: Three weeks on a deserted island in the Bahamas
I’d like to meet: The Dalai Lama
The best advice my mother ever gave me: Don’t talk so much, and eat your food!
My proudest moments: Training my dog Iggy not to do his business in the house. Seriously, making people happy whenever I can do so reasonably
Guilty pleasure: Cigars (occasionally)
Pet peeves: People who drive slowly in the left lane and talk on their cell phones
Favorite food: Maryland steamed crabs
A book I’d recommend: Good to Great by Jim Collins
Favorite TV show: The Sopranos – A quote to live by: “Holding resentment in is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It doesn’t work.”

4,000 or so faculty and staff and more than 10,000 students. I had been a SLU trustee for three years, so I knew there were some significant challenges, but I also believed that there was great potential for SLU. But, I was never trained to be a president of a major university. And I had to start somewhere. I jumped right into this job from being the dean of the large College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola Chicago, where we had only been in operation for 10 years. Traditionally, a person is at least an academic vice president before becoming a president, but I jumped right in.

Also, there was a definite learning curve to understand SLU’s culture because I was not from St. Louis or a graduate of Saint Louis University. I had only been a SLU trustee for three years, which really gave me a limited amount of knowledge and experience — attending quarterly board meetings did not amount to a lot of time spent on SLU’s campus.

Eventually I got over my apprehension by listening. I listened to a wide variety of people and their problems. At that time, there were some people who were jockeying for me to take a different job. I needed to listen, to distinguish facts from fiction, so I decided to give myself more time to understand what motivated them. I listened, I met with my Jesuit brothers at Jesuit Hall than in a five-star restaurant.

And, yes, I told I have a weird sense of humor.

What is in your childhood indicated that this is what you’d be doing?

Nothing. I bunched first grade because I grew up speaking Italian and wasn’t as fluent in English as I needed to be as a first-grade school kid growing up in the northwest side of Chicago. I was one of those kids in the shadows.

I don’t consider myself a celebrity, but I know some people watch carefully what I do and say. So I’m more careful.

Of course, I try to be as natural as possible. But I think I’m much more approachable in guard with the business community and with people I meet for the first time because they’re evaluating me on what they’ve heard about me as a person or about my role as president of SLU.

But I’m more like myself around students. I like to joke around with them, which sometimes surprises them.

What are the differences between your public persona and the “real” you?

I have a reputation for being direct, tough and outspoken with a “take no prisoners” approach to business situations, but those who knew me well would probably describe me as quiet, somewhat introverted. I really enjoy time alone with my two golden retrievers (Gancia and Rigg) especially at the end of the day. So believe it or not, I’m actually a bit shy. I save to work at making small talk.

And it would probably surprise people to know that I am very casual and prefer informal to formal. At home, I am most comfortable in a T-shirt, walking shorts and Birkenstocks. I’d rather eat dinner with my family and with people I meet for the first time, whereas I am more formal at work because I am, for many in the external world, the face of SLU. And since I live on campus, students, alumni and faculty, all of whom expect different things, often stop me when I walk on campus.

And I notice everything — so when I’m out, even walking my dogs or driving them around campus in my golf cart, I make mental notes of things around campus that need attention.

What do alumni mean to SLU? What can they still do for SLU?

You’ve had a successful career. Do you have any personal goals left?

Do you have a timetable for retirement or perhaps a career change?

Do you have any personal goals left?

You’ve had a successful career. Do you have any personal goals left?

When you finally do retire or change careers, what do you hope is your legacy?

What can they still do for SLU?

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