As University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J., retires, he reflects on the past and on the future.

By Laura Geiser
William Kauffman was named interim president, serving for the University alumni, supporters anniversary Gala: Celebrating father biondi’s Leadership.” the on May 4, nearly 800 Saint Louis University — time for me to move on to the next phase of my life.”

Biondi has been named president emeritus, and he began a one-year sabatical on Sept. 1. SLU Vice President and General Counsel William Kauffman was named interim president, serving for the academic year. Biondi hasn’t said much publicly since deciding to retire. But in the following interview, conducted in late August, he reflects on his time at SLU and his thoughts on his future.

On May 4, nearly 800 Saint Louis University alumni, supporters and community leaders gathered in Chaifetz Arena for the “25th Anniversary Gala: Celebrating Father Biondi’s Leadership.” The event raised approximately $1.4 million for student scholarships and academic initiatives.

The guests knew they were there to celebrate the long tenure of University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J. But they didn’t know they were about to hear big news.

When Biondi took to the podium for his scheduled remarks, he made a surprise announcement — telling the crowd that he planned to retire from the presidency of Saint Louis University. “Just as I helped lead SLU’s transformation when I arrived here more than 25 years ago, I know it is now time for the next transformation to begin,” he said. “And, so, with the blessing of our board of trustees, I have decided it is time for a transition in leadership for Saint Louis University — time for me to move on to the next phase of my life.”

Biondi has been named president emeritus, and he began a one-year sabatical on Sept. 1. SLU Vice President and General Counsel William Kauffman was named interim president, serving for the academic year. Biondi hasn’t said much publicly since deciding to retire. But in the following interview, conducted in late August, he reflects on his time at SLU and his thoughts on his future.

On May 4, nearly 800 Saint Louis University alumni, supporters and community leaders gathered in Chaifetz Arena for the “25th Anniversary Gala: Celebrating Father Biondi’s Leadership.” The event raised approximately $1.4 million for student scholarships and academic initiatives.

The guests knew they were there to celebrate the long tenure of University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J. But they didn’t know they were about to hear big news.

When Biondi took to the podium for his scheduled remarks, he made a surprise announcement — telling the crowd that he planned to retire from the presidency of Saint Louis University. “Just as I helped lead SLU’s transformation when I arrived here more than 25 years ago, I know it is now time for the next transformation to begin,” he said. “And, so, with the blessing of our board of trustees, I have decided it is time for a transition in leadership for Saint Louis University — time for me to move on to the next phase of my life.”

Biondi has been named president emeritus, and he began a one-year sabatical on Sept. 1. SLU Vice President and General Counsel William Kauffman was named interim president, serving for the academic year. Biondi hasn’t said much publicly since deciding to retire. But in the following interview, conducted in late August, he reflects on his time at SLU and his thoughts on his future.
When encountering this, I would advise my younger self not to get too distracted by this attitude because, in fact, most faculty and staff don’t see it as a way and do realize that they are accountable for their words and actions when teaching, conducting research and doing their jobs.

**THERE’S NO INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR BEING A UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT, HOW DID YOU LEARN TO DO IT?**

I had a great predecessor, Father Tim Fitzgerald, S.J., who really primed SLU for the future. He offered me very good advice. I also had the good fortune to work with SLU’s former president Paul Reitter, S.J., who had amazing institutional knowledge.

And, honestly, I learned a lot by just doing the job. Also important are self-reflection, prayer, instinct, openness to ideas and timely decision-making. Our excellent trustees, a strong executive staff of vice presidents, deans and managers, and other key leaders, helped set an example that I hope will continue.

**WHAT’S THE BEST THING THAT’S HAPPENED DURING YOUR TENURE?**

That has to be our increased enrollment. When I started, we had about 9,500 students; today we have almost 14,000 students with excellent academic credentials. We offer an outstanding Jesuit education, so the more people who can benefit from our mission and vision, the better. And I believe the more SLU alumni there are, the better our world will be. After all, aren’t we forming, informing and transforming our students to be good citizens and effective leaders worldwide?

**WHAT ARE YOU MOST PROUD OF?**

I’m most proud of SLU’s emphasis on service. It has always been our tradition as part of our Jesuit mission to prepare men and women for others, but thanks to the tireless energy of our students and key leaders around campus, service now is truly embedded in the SLU experience. We have so many initiatives — like Casa de Salud, which offers health assistance to undocumented immigrants; the medical school’s student-run Jesuit Health Resource Center, which provides medical care to needy residents of North St. Louis; and our legal clinics, which serve the region’s homeless, veterans of our armed forces and victims of domestic violence. These efforts and so many others benefit our local community and benefit our students, who learn so much from one another by helping others.

**WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE MEMORY AS PRESIDENT?**

There are too many to choose from! But I will say that I always enjoyed the meet-and-greet time right after our new student convocation every August. Our first-year Billikens and their families come down to the arena floor, and I had a chance to literally see the future of our University and talk with our parents who have hopes and dreams for their children. It always energized me for the school year ahead.

**IS THERE ANYTHING YOU’D DO DIFFERENTLY, IF GIVEN THE CHANCE?**

No, I don’t think that way. There’s no way to go back in time and change anything, so why dwell on the past? But I do believe that one should reflect on events, note what is right and on target, and forge ahead confidently. One also needs to correct mistakes and humbly acknowledge them, make appropriate decisions in light of those mistakes, and forge on.

**WHAT WERE THE BEST DECISIONS YOU MADE AS PRESIDENT?**

It always came down to people. The best decisions were always about hiring the right people to do the right job. I have worked with some dedicated vice presidents and deans who were just as passionate about SLU as I am, and they have been instrumental in ensuring SLU’s success.

**I’m also very proud of some of the “risks” we have taken to move SLU forward, for example, establishing new schools, institutes and centers, relocating Parks College to St. Louis and expanding our Medical Center by constructing the Doisy Research Center, buying the Pervy Dairy property for future growth and adding the stadium and Health Sciences Education Union there. Those have proven to be good decisions in the long run. I think the same will be said of our new downtown law school.**

**YOU’VE WEATHERED SOME STORMS AS PRESIDENT OVER THE YEARS. HOW DID THAT AFFECT YOU AND SLU?**

As I said earlier, it’s never easy to face unfounded criticism, but I always think it made SLU and me stronger. For example, early in my tenure, people complained about all the green space we were converting from black asphalt and complained that we were buying vacant, derelict, dilapidated properties. Can you believe it? And could you imagine SLU any differently today?

New students come to campus and think SLU has always been like it is today. Their parents and grandparents can tell them that there was another era and remind the new students that they are lucky to attend a modern, urban university like SLU.

**HAS THE AVERAGE SLU STUDENT CHANGED IN THE TIME YOU’VE BEEN PRESIDENT?**

Students seem very different. They are all connected via their cell phones and social media, so it seems that they wouldn’t have anything in common with the students I met when I arrived in 1987, but fundamentally they’re the same at their very core. They are drawn to SLU for the same reasons that students were back then: They want to change the world. They have dreams. Many are passionate about how they can make a better life for themselves and for their family and friends. They understand quickly and most of them accept the fundamentals of a Jesuit university education.

**HOW WOULD YOU CHARACTERIZE THE CAMPUS NOW VERSUS WHEN YOU BECAME PRESIDENT?**

Simply said, I think it’s more inviting. We’ve got green space, fountains, flowers and more spaces for study and quiet contemplation. It’s also better defined. When I arrived, you could drive right by construction of the $81 million on-campus Chaifetz Arena in 2008. The 10,600-seat, multipurpose facility has become a home to SLU’s basketball teams and hosts many concerts. The decrease of the student-faculty ratio to 12:1 and reduction of the average class size to 24.4 students. Completion of Scott Hall in downtown St. Louis, the Center for Global Citizenship (formerly the West Pine Gym), the Health Sciences Education Union, Medical Center Stadium, Hotel Ignacio, Water Tower Inn, John and Lucy Cook Hall, McGowan Douglass Hall, Doisy College of Health Sciences, Drexel-Marshall Hall, and the Henry Lay Center for Arts and Learning in Louisiana, Mo., as well as the renovation and expansion of Busch Student Center and the renovation at Pius XII Memorial Library among many other projects. An increase of the University enrollment from $93 million in 1987 to $956 million. Classification of SLU as a research institution by the Carnegie Foundation. The top 100 ranking of SLU in undergraduate and graduate academic programs by U.S. News & World Report. The increase of full-time ranked faculty from 725 to 1,390.

**COMMENTS FROM FORMER BOARD CHAIRS:**

Billiken broadcaster Bob Ramsey is at the podium. Beside him, from left, Paul Reinert, S.J., who had amazing institutional knowledge; Albertina (seated), at the April 2006 ceremony honoring him as St. Louis 2005 “Citizen of the Year;” then-then-chancellor Ed Kenna; and then-Chairman of SLU’s Board of Trustees Barry Berenato. Bollman acknowledges the crowd at the annual Golf Cart Parade during SLU’s 2007 Homecoming. Farewell, Father Biondi
SLU and not even know you had passed it. Today, SLU makes a big impression on metropolitan citizens and visitors. I'm always reluctant to put too much emphasis on the physical changes to our campus because we've improved so much on the academic side as well, but the fact is that an attractive, safe and well-equipped campus is important. It helps recruit students. It helps retain students. And it visually reflects the outstanding institution that we are.

They should know that it hasn't all been about beauty and buildings. Those things are easy to photograph and showcase in Universitas, but they're only one part of the story.

Our most important accomplishments are not as easy to display in the alumni magazine. I'm thinking of our modern, high-tech education; our full-tuition Presidential Scholarships; our 67 endowed chairs and professorships; our increasing research funding; our endowment, which is $956 million; and our new, innovative academic programs, such as our Centers for Sustainability, for World Health and Medicine, and for Global Citizenship. These accomplishments and so many others are sometimes overlooked when people focus on physical improvements to campus.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE POSITION OF PRESIDENT NOW VERSUS WHEN YOU FIRST CAME TO SLU?

The SLU president is more a conductor of a symphony, trying to draw the best out of every player and instrument — and then making it blend in harmony. But sometimes even a tuba or drummer is off-key, and the conductor has to motivate the player or correct him or her to get back on the music score!

Also, we've grown, which means that it's more and more difficult to be involved in every decision here. When I started, I got involved in all aspects of SLU in order to listen, learn and act appropriately. As we grow, I have to trust and rely on our executive team to make the day-to-day decisions and bring me in when necessary. For someone like me who is very interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day!

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN OTHERS?

I think I might like to spend time with people who are involved in the arts. I enjoy people who are interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE JOURNEY?

I am discerning how best I can continue to be an instrument of our Lord as a Jesuit priest. Stay tuned.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN YOURSELF?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN OTHERS?

I think I might like to spend time with people who are interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN YOURSELF?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN YOURSELF?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN OTHERS?

I think I might like to spend time with people who are interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN YOURSELF?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN OTHERS?

I think I might like to spend time with people who are interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN YOURSELF?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN OTHERS?

I think I might like to spend time with people who are interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN YOURSELF?

I see my focus on helping the transition in whatever way I can, but I will not interfere. If asked, I will share my thoughts and experiences with my successor.

WHAT IS THE TRAIT YOU MOST DEPREDE IN OTHERS?

I think I might like to spend time with people who are interested in details, that's a challenge, but there are only so many hours in the day! Accountability. Accountability. Accountability.