Eight years ago, Edward Ayers came to the University of Richmond, and shortly thereafter, he made the school a promise. Upon arrival, Ayers promised to “position the university to thrive in the modern higher education landscape and to create a learning environment unlike any other” in the preface of the Richmond Promise. Years later, the university community is left with a promise fulfilled, and as the sun begins to set on Ayers’ presidency, the community looks ahead to the new chapter that will begin when Ronald Crutcher becomes our tenth president. The legacy of Ed Ayers will undoubtedly be one of transformative and bold ideas that allowed the university to thrive and grow. His accomplishments are both high in quantity and quality, and they have had an immeasurable impact on the lives of Richmond students. Before he steps down, President Ayers sat down with Forum Magazine for one last interview as president.

STORY BY DYLAN MCAULEY
PHOTOGRAPHY BY KELLY BONAVENTURA
Why do you think the goals of the Richmond Promise were so successfully achieved?

I think the fact that we only focused on five major things [in the Richmond Promise] is what allowed us to be successful. When you look at the progress we have made on inclusivity compared to national averages, you have to be impressed. People have been trying for decades to move that needle, and we did. I think that people have to be impressed by the progress on accessibility and affordability too. Those are two fundamental things that I came here to do, and I feel that we can mark them off. As I hand off the baton to Dr. Crutcher, I know that we are better off than we were before, and he will continue to build on what we’ve done.

Would you share in greater detail what you hope to do in the next few years and how, if at all, you plan to work with President-Elect Crutcher?

It’s Dr. Crutcher’s university now so the best thing that I can do as a former president is to get out of the way and let the new president do what he wants to do. Former presidents on campus have never been anything other than helpful when I needed them and that’s what I plan to do for Dr. Crutcher. The great part of my job here and at [University of Virginia] was getting to work on a vertical axis by getting to know everyone who did everything. I’ve loved doing that, but now I plan to work on a horizontal axis where I can work on broader projects. American history is taught in every school in America, and if I can make that better, more exciting, and more engaging, that’s a good use of my energies. I’ll be anchored at Richmond but working to improve American history across the country.

What do you feel is the biggest focus should be for the next administration?

You can feel the energy and momentum here. What we are offering here is something that you can’t get anywhere else. So I think—and I think Dr. Crutcher agrees—that we have to maintain the momentum by continuing to do innovative and engaging things to fulfill the claim that we are offering the best undergraduate experience in America. The fact that someone as experienced as Dr. Crutcher looks at our university and says that he wants to associate himself with it is testimony to the quality and momentum of the university.

What do you think the university’s most important strength is?

I say this every day, but only because it’s true. The University of Richmond is the only top 50 liberal arts school that has a top business school, that has the first school of leadership studies in the world, and that has the School of Professional and Continuing Studies. Each of those things is unique. Then, we are one of only two [top liberal arts schools] with a law school. Hyperbole and salesmanship aside, that’s what sets us apart. We’re a liberal arts university, but we have the additional capacities to amplify what a liberal arts education is for. All of the energy from each school is focused on students, and the schools provide a richer experience as a result. We have the offerings of a larger university, but you are learning in an intimate classroom environment where you are tested every time you walk into class.

What do you think makes President-Elect Crutcher the right person to not only lead the university but also to build upon the work that you have done with the Richmond Promise?

I think the fact that he is an artist makes him unique. I think the fact that, unlike me, he has actually been a college president will allow him to make a smoother and more effective transition, which will aid in keeping the momentum. The fact that he is both a scholar in music and that he has the experience of being a president makes him uniquely qualified and we are really fortunate. In many ways, Dr. Crutcher is bringing a much broader range of experience than I did.

What are your feelings as your tenure as president is coming to a close?

It depends on which minute you ask me. On one hand, I feel great satisfaction and ask myself, ‘This is so precious, why would you quit?’ But, on the other hand, I came here to do certain things and they’re done. Instead of staying in this job for the comforts, I want to do other things that I can do. I never intended to stay until I could never do another job. It’s bittersweet. I feel a great sense of gratitude for everyone, but also a sense of sadness that it’s over. No one thought I would leave U. Va., including myself, but after making the bold choice to come here and now that it’s over I am ready to give myself a new set of challenges.

Do you have any specific hope for what you want your legacy to be?

You would think I have an answer for this, but I have not let myself think about legacy. I’m just trying to do each thing as well as I can while hoping that it all adds up to something of substance.

What do you think is the most important thing you have learned about college students while serving as president?

They are wiser than you might think. [Many] of the Richmond Promise ideas came from [the input of] students who were here at the time. Students will take part in every opportunity that we give them. I am continually inspired by the individuals I talk to here and have a greater sense of what this is all for.

What do you feel is the biggest difference between your first day here and now?

I think that the university has a greater sense of who it is and where it wants to go. It’s a short answer, but it’s true.
What won’t you miss about being president?

The travel. The first hundred times you’re in a hotel somewhere is more fun that the next hundred times. That part just becomes a kind of necessary cost of business. Next time I travel, I want to travel with my wife on our 40th anniversary, which we didn’t get to do [in previous years] because I was working. I will not miss heading to the Richmond airport every week.

What will you be doing the day after you step down as president?

I think the first thing I will be doing is wondering what to do with my time when I don’t get hundreds of emails a day. After 14 years of academic administration, I have developed muscle memory of always having too much to do. Right now I am writing a book, which is one of the hardest things I have ever done, so trying to make that transition from external stimulation to internal motivation is going to be an interesting challenge.

There is no question that the University of Richmond is fundamentally better off than it was before Ayers became president. Now, as he prepares to end his term, the university can take solace in the fact that our next president is supremely qualified. Crutcher’s experience not only includes serving as president of Wheaton College but also working at a range of different types of schools, traveling the world as a concert cellist, and fighting for the values of liberal arts education across the country. President-elect Crutcher is a man of merit, integrity, and intelligence. As the year draws to a close, the university will come together to thank President Ayers and to welcome President-Elect Crutcher to the Spider family.