





BEING BOBBY VAGT

A True Story About
a Man Having the
Time of His Life



Once there was a college president who got up early each morning, threw on jeans and T-shirt, and went out to fetch the morning paper. While he was at it, he picked up the papers for the college guest house, just next door, and took them inside to lay on the hall table for the visitors. One morning, as he finished this daily task, a man came down the stairs and said, Excuse me, do you work here? Yes I do, answered the college president. Can I help you? Why, yes, said the man, I need some help with these bags.



So after the president helped get the bags down the stairs and loaded into the visitor's car, the man offered him a little something for his trouble. Oh, no thanks, said the president. I am happy I could help. What's your name? asked the guest. It's Bobby, said the college president. Well, Bobby, you have been so nice, I'll be writing a note to the president of this school to tell him how considerate his staff is.

The college president never did get the note.

In the summer of 1997, President Robert F. Vagt hit campus at a trot, with a ready smile and a list in his pocket. Within days, he identified the students as "sixteen hundred bolts of lightning," and he began to take them and their dreams deep into his heart, in a way that may have surprised even him.

Ruth Anne, with him all the way, knew he would attack his new job in typical Bobby Vagt fashion: full throttle. In the next ten years she would host the college community on hundreds of occasions; graciously welcome expected and unexpected overnight guests; and accompany the president to events on campus and on distant shores—weekly, daily, hourly. He called her Chip, and at the end of long days, they would share a PBJ or a grilled cheese sandwich in the kitchen of their historic campus home. And his steady deflection of praise, his thoughtfulness, and his passion for Davidson would be mirrored in her, his best friend and most trusted adviser.

Earlier Days

The last time he had lived on this campus was in the sixties. An ROTC student, he was on the swim team, active in his fraternity, president of the Psychology Club and the Interfraternity Council, a hall counselor. He was dating Ruth Anne and working three jobs to make ends meet. On Sundays during his last two years, he'd drive up to a small church in the mountains to help preach, something he learned how to do as the grandchild of a Presbyterian minister. Presumably, he also went to class and did some homework.

In those days, Ruth Anne says, he kept his list in his head.

As a student, he took a number of math classes with J. B. Stroud, and became close to the Stroud family and their children. J. B. and Ruby think he was missing his three young sisters, and that he liked their homemade pizza. When Ruth Anne came up from Queens for



Within days, he identified the students as “sixteen hundred bolts of lightning,” and he began to take them and their dreams deep into his heart, in a way that may have surprised even him.

a weekend, she stayed in “Ruth Anne’s room” in the Strouds’ red saltbox home on Pine Road. J. B. and Ruby recall how the newlywed Vagts watched over that house while their family took a cross-country trip. At their return, they were greeted with harvested peaches in the freezer, a banner saying, “WELCOME HOME STROUDS”—and short-sheeted beds.

In the seventies Bobby was working in Manhattan, legend has it, saving New York City from its fiscal crisis. One day a package arrived at the Strouds’ front door. “Bobby knew I loved hats,” says Ruby today, as she reaches into a closet in their retirement apartment to retrieve a chic navy blue wide-brimmed hat. “I still wear it.”

Taking Charge

After Davidson, there was Duke Divinity School, and after that, a couple of jobs in the prison system. He moved into fiscal management in NYC, and from there, into business. At every juncture, he rose to the top. Ruth Anne says her mother wondered why he couldn’t keep a job. When the call came from Davidson, he was president of an oil



> (top left) Freedom School students at the Ada Jenkins Center hear a story from the president; (above) Comforting the community on September 11, 2001, in the brand new Alvarez College Union.

Bobby

company in Texas. He took the call.

He fell for the students, yes, but nothing missed his attention. He had inherited a strong college, and now it was his job to keep it strong. He started asking questions and adding to his list.

People could see right away that this was a different kind of president. For one thing, he asked everyone to call him Bobby. It was "Yo!" to students, peers, and young colleagues. Phone conversations and emails tended to be polite but short. He got quickly to the point, or moved the conversation there with a deft remark. He knew when to slow down, but the man did not waste time. He had a lot to do.

Soon, he was setting the bar high and starting to push. People began to learn how to listen to him. Our athletic facilities are not up to par. We need more resources for financial aid—a lot. We need to raise faculty salaries—a lot. Every day he marked things off the list; every day he added more to it. The only way to get it done was to work all of the time, to pack two days into one. Fortunately, he was having a ball.

A man of action, he knew an opportunity when he saw one. An alumnus mentioned that the Royal Shakespeare Company sometimes engaged in residency programs at American universities. Why not here? He became involved in the Children's Defense Fund and learned about Freedom Schools. Why not here? A political science professor suggested a teleconference with Davidson and Iraqi students on the eve of the war. You bet.

He was determined to cement the sense of community at Davidson, a challenge in a digital age that threatened to separate people rather than connect them. No more waiting for a college union; let's get it done. He hosted "doughnut Wednesdays" in Chambers lobby every other week, senior dinners, faculty and staff breakfasts, and renewed an old tradition of a campus convocation to start the academic year.

It seemed like he was always on campus, but he traveled often to connect with parents, alumni, and friends across the country. He went to a record number of alumni chapter meetings, and at every one, he told stories about the sixteen hundred bolts of lightning back home. His stories always revealed something at the core of the Davidson experience—commitment, selflessness, discipline, thoughtfulness, honor, humility. Familiar values to him, ones he had learned from his strong, multi-generational New England family.



He fell for the students, yes, but nothing missed his attention. He had inherited a strong college, and now it was his job to keep it strong. He started asking questions and adding to his list.

Bobby



> (facing page, top) Riding a community bike; (below) Ashley Moore '07 presented a scrapbook of memories at the campus Vagt celebration, where Bobby and Ruth Anne learned that over 1,180 faculty, staff, students, alumni, parents, and friends had committed \$5.8 million (and counting) in their honor, in support of the Annual Fund, the no-loan initiative, and other campus projects.

> (this page, clockwise from the top) At the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, August 2006; Serving up Wednesday doughnuts to Onita Vaz-Hooper, assistant professor of English; then- Trustee Chair Ed Crutchfield '63 approves of a parental hug for new alumna Lindsey Vagt at Commencement 2001; at a campus forum on diversity.

Wildcat Tales

For every story Bobby shared about students, faculty, and staff, there's one people tell about him. Here's one that members of the presidential selection committee in 1997 like to tell.

They admit that Bobby Vagt was something of a dark horse, not an academic or a trustee or a very familiar face to many of them. Preparing to meet him in the airport for his first interview, they asked, how will we know you? Oh, don't worry, you'll know me, he said. Yep. He was the guy wearing a big red Wildcat football jersey over his business suit.

That first meeting was enough to convince them that this enthusiastic, energetic, and accomplished leader was the person they were looking for.

And there's the story about a professor who typically works late in his Chambers office. Leaving a few minutes before ten one night, he ran into the president coming in the door, headed to an SGA meeting. "Golly," said the professor, "isn't ten a little late for an SGA meeting?"

"Nope," said Bobby. "It's usually at eleven, but the dean of students is coming and he doesn't stay up that late!"

The stories are legion about Bobby the Wildcat fan. He went to all the games he

could and yelled the loudest, keeping the refs honest. At soccer and football games, he was up and down the sidelines. At basketball games he had a lucky seat, and he was almost always in it. The players looked for him, knew he was there, dug a little deeper. And the fans went wild, because if the president cared this much, why, they should, too.

"When he was at games, he was in the action," said Tia Washington, star point guard on the women's basketball team.

Everyone saw him at the games, Tia says, but they didn't see the times he showed up at practice, just to check in and give a little pep talk.



She repeats one of the president's tips: "Did you know that when you are really nervous and you need to settle yourself down, you can put your tongue to the roof of your mouth and you'll start to relax? Try it sometime. It works."

A staff member tells about the time her toddler went up to the president at a college event. He needed to go potty. Bobby led him off to the men's room without a second thought.

An alumnus tells about running into him carrying a broken shutter across campus one day after a football game. Bobby was taking it over to the carpenter shop to be repaired; he was going that way anyway.

There's the student who was shocked to see the name of his adviser: President Vagt. Of course, the first thing he learned was to call him Bobby. This student took seven 101 courses his first two years, and his adviser said, bravo, that's what a liberal arts education is all about. When he decided that economics, though not his best subject, was the one he liked the most, his adviser said, "Great, major in economics. You can do it."

Junior year, this young man came

back from Christmas break feeling very low. He had left home on bad terms with his folks. Of course, the first person he called when he returned to campus was Bobby Vagt.

A math professor recalls going to a concert one night, where one of his majors, a cellist, was performing her own compositions with a chamber group. There was the president in the small audience. Afterwards, the professor thanked him for taking the time to come. No, no, Bobby said genuinely—I should be thanking *you*.

Bobby may have had more personal relationships with students than anyone else on campus. They saw him in the weight room, at meetings, at their performances, games, and presentations. They say that their president took pride in providing them a place in which they could achieve, and loved being there to cheer when they did. They say he was humble, egalitarian, not afraid to be silly, and that his ubiquitous presence on campus made them feel closer to their college. One professor predicts a burst in alumni engagement from those who shared their Davidson years with Bobby Vagt.

Bobby



The stories are legion about Bobby the Wildcat fan. He went to all the games he could and yelled the loudest, keeping the refs honest.

> (facing page) Four decades of leadership and service: John W. Kuykendall '59; Samuel R. Spencer '40; and Robert F. Vagt '69; (above) A new name for Chambers' south wing was announced at a trustee dinner honoring Bobby Vagt, where former Board Chairs Ed Crutchfield '63 and Larry Dagenhart '53 unveiled his portrait.

Bobby



When the campaign closed, donors had contributed \$272 million to Davidson's future. Many of those millions had been handed directly to Bobby Vagt.

Let Learning Be Cherished

At the same time, he was going to SGA meetings and meeting with *The Davidsonian* staff and having breakfast with faculty and supporting student activities, Bobby was leading the effort to identify the college's most pressing needs. Then, he joined with the trustees to launch and complete a \$250 million campaign to meet those needs. He traveled far and wide to sit down with alumni and parents and friends to talk about how they might help the college. He asked people for huge sums of money, and far more often than not, they signed up with a smile. Across campus you can see many of these heroes' names. For every name etched on a building, there are scores more behind professorships, scholarships, lectures, and

programs, and hundreds of others who made gifts that strengthened and transformed Davidson over the last decade. A trustee campaign cabinet carried much of the load, but everyone points to Bobby Vagt as inspiration. He was relentless. Passion and honesty were key, as was his profound gratitude for every gift of any size.

Gene Cochrane, president of The Duke Endowment, speaks of the president's remarkable candor: "He told us the good and he told us the bad; we felt like we were getting the unvarnished truth about what was happening at Davidson."

An alumnus tells about the time Bobby called to make an appointment. The president was planning to come talk about the Chambers Building renovation. The alumnus told him he was happy to make a gift, but it wasn't necessary to come see

> (facing page, top) Clearing after an ice storm; (below) With grandson Max, son of daughter Ashley '94 and Warren Buford '97; (right) the Chief Wildcat with his eye on the scoreboard.

him. Nope, Bobby said, it would be very rude not to come down and talk about this in person.

"Bobby showed up with his red backpack slung over his shoulder with a bottle of water and his cell phone in it, visited for thirty minutes, made Davidson's gratitude and his personal thanks clear, and then caught a plane back to Charlotte," said the alumnus. "I have to admit, it did make me feel good."

When the campaign closed, donors had contributed \$272 million to Davidson's future. Many of those millions had been handed directly to Bobby Vagt.

A Serious Man

Both of Ruth Anne and Bobby's daughters graduated from Davidson, Ashley in 1994 and Lindsey in 2001. Lindsey's first year at Davidson was also her father's first as president, and when she ran the Freshman Cake Race in the late August heat, so did he, but incognito: he was the guy wearing a giant Wildcat head. He ran the Cake Race every year in that get-up, sharing a frequent Bobby Vagt lesson: you can be a serious person without taking yourself too seriously.

When it came to managing the educational enterprise that is Davidson in the twenty-first century, Bobby Vagt was completely serious. John McCartney, current chair of the board of trustees, characterizes him as the image of engaged management.

Dean of Faculty Clark Ross says the president knew the balance of every line item of every budget on campus. "I have cautioned well-meaning colleagues never to enter into a battle of detail with Bobby," he says, "warning that they may be surprised and overwhelmed by his command of facts."



Historic Change

The endowment more than doubled, new buildings rose, and old ones were made new during Bobby Vagt's watch, but the college's growth was far more than skin deep. The president was unafraid to challenge the status quo if it was the right thing to do, and he believed that a more diverse community at all levels was right for Davidson.

Early in his tenure, when Ed Crutchfield was chair of the board, historic changes were made in the trustee by-laws, limiting trustees to two terms of service. Some opposed this change; Crutchfield remembers that it took grit for the leadership to carry it through. And he sees it as a key piece of a remarkable presidency. Acknowledging the strong institution that Bobby Vagt inherited, Crutchfield believes that this president's energy, tenacity, and imagination really put Davidson on the national and international map.

As members retired, the executive committee began to look more broadly for qualified men and women to nominate for trustee service. It was not hard to find gifted leaders among the college family. Today, trustees hail from all over the country, the chair is from Chicago, and there are twice as many women on the board as in 1997.

Later in Bobby Vagt's presidency, the Alumni Association Board asked the trustees to take on a far thornier institutional

The endowment more than doubled, new buildings rose, and old ones were made new during Bobby Vagt's watch, but the college's growth was far more than skin deep. The president was unafraid to challenge the status quo if it was the right thing to do, and he believed that a more diverse community at all levels was right for Davidson.



> Since 1998, the First Couple have treated the graduating class to a Senior Party in the backyard of the President's House. At this year's final fête, the Class of 2007 raised a glass to honor its favorite son, and wished Ruth Anne and Bobby Vagt farewell and Godspeed.





> (above) Ruth Anne Vagt with Associate Professor of Chemistry Durwin Striplin at the all-campus Vagt celebration.



John McCartney sums up the Vagt decade. "He has built a bridge to the future for Davidson College," he says. "It's there for others to cross over."

issue: the fact that people who were not active members of a Christian church or who were from other faith traditions could not qualify for board membership.

The board held a retreat to study this matter in depth, with guidance from the college chaplain, current and emeriti religion faculty, and trustee clerics. They asked the chair to appoint an ad hoc committee to examine Davidson's Statement of Purpose and the college's historic relationship to the Presbyterian Church. A year later, after campus forums, input from the college family, and extensive board debate, the trustees voted to change the bylaws to the effect that twenty percent of the board could be individuals who were not active members of a Christian church.

While the trustees worked alongside him on college business, Bobby Vagt was the lightning rod for both praise and criticism. The praise was plentiful, the criticism sparse, but at times harsh. The president took the antagonism with grace and the praise with a grain of salt.

In the last year of the Vagt presidency, Davidson reached another historic milestone. In an era of increasing tuition costs,

accessibility had long been a concern for college leaders. After years of working to lower the amount of loans in financial aid packaging, the board of trustees voted in February to eliminate such loans altogether. The decision took courage and commitment; but as a result, the goal of increasing economic diversity among Davidson students was closer than ever. The president gave full credit to the board.

A Final List and Farewell

John McCartney sums up the Vagt decade. "He has built a bridge to the future for Davidson College," he says. "It's there for others to cross over."

McCartney met with Bobby in the spring of 2006, aware that the president was going to talk to him about stepping down. Bobby leaned over the table, fingers laced, and explained that the college needed a president who could help develop the next vision, see that vision funded and realized. That would take another ten years, he said, and he wasn't the man to do it. As Bobby reached into his pocket, the chair of

the board thought this list would concern the details of the transition. Nope. It was a list, a good-sized list—of the things Bobby wanted to accomplish in his last year at Davidson College.

It was a busy year, a busy decade, but now it was time to say good-bye. In April, the trustees honored the Vagt era by naming the south wing of Chambers Building for Ruth Anne and Bobby Vagt. In early May, the faculty passed a resolution with a standing ovation, thanking him for his decade of dedicated and effective leadership. On May 8, the entire campus community gathered to celebrate the students' president, and thank him and Ruth Anne for giving their hearts to Davidson for the last ten years. At commencement, a throng of parents, alumni, faculty, staff, and students—4,000 strong—honored Davidson's sixteenth president with an extended, enthusiastic standing ovation.

The college president waved it all away with his now familiar smile. He'd had the time of his life. ♦

The Robert F. Vagt Presidency 1997–2007

Major Accomplishments

Academics

Chambers renovation, Sloan Music Center, Duke Family Performance Hall, Dean Rusk International Studies Center, and planned Cunningham Fine Arts renovation
Davidson Research Initiative, supported by The Duke Endowment
Fifteen faculty endowments, including eleven endowed professorships
Royal Shakespeare Company Residency
Campus Sculpture Program
Joel Conarroe Lectureship

Athletics

Wilson Baseball Field
Richardson Stadium Renovation
Alumni Soccer Stadium, 1992 Team Field
Carol Grotnes Belk Turf Field
Gail and Ernie Doe Weight Room
Davidson Scholars Program
Stephen B. Smith Football Endowment
Irwin Belk Track
W. Melvin Means Basketball Endowment
Bryan Scholarship

Community

Knobloch Campus Center
Alvarez College Union
Samuel W. Newell WDAV Building
Tomlinson Residence Hall
Vail Commons Renovation
Patterson Court Renovation
Belk Residence Hall Renovation
Duke Residence Hall Renovation
Thomas M. Belk Chaplaincy
Lilly Program for the Theological Exploration of Vocation
Chidsey Leadership Program
Freedom Schools
Information Transformation Technology

Accessibility

Trustee decision to eliminate loans in financial aid packaging
208 new scholarship funds
Expansion of the John M. Belk Scholarship Program

Fund Raising/Fiscal Health

Let Learning Be Cherished \$272 million
Alumni Annual Fund participation increased to 60-plus percent
Endowment grew from \$178 million to \$460 million



Contributors

Many members of the college family contributed to this story. Among them were:

John Bell '99
John Chidsey '83, Trustee
Edward E. Crutchfield '63, Former Chair, Board of Trustees
Debbie Dillon Darden '78, Trustee
Marian Wright Edelman, President and Founder of the Children's Defense Fund
Karen Goldstein, Vice President for Business and Finance
Will Gwaltney '08
A. J. Hergenroeder '08
Briana Hunter '08
Eileen Keeley '89, Vice President for College Relations
Ben Klein, Dolan Professor of Mathematics
Paul R. Leonard '62, Trustee
John F. McCartney '74, Chair, Board of Trustees
Wendy Roberts, Administrative Assistant to the President
Clark G. Ross, Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty
Ruby and J. B. Stroud '51, Professor Emeritus of Mathematics
Ruth Anne Vagt
Jim Vann '50, Board of Visitors
Tia Washington '07

Booby