



A Running Start

SUU'S NEW PRESIDENT MAKES AN IMMEDIATE IMPACT

On Friday, November 10, 2006, the Utah Board of Regents announced **Dr. Michael T. Benson** as the 15th president of Southern Utah University, and though his official first day was not until January 2, 2007, President Benson began working for SUU and all of its constituents on November 11th. When he did finally take his seat behind his desk in the Bennion Building on campus (named after his immediate predecessor **Dr. Steven D. Bennion** and grandfather, **Milton Bennion**, SUU's first president) Benson brought with him three million donated dollars (*see article, page 15*) which he had garnered a few weekends before from an anonymous alumnus—all

of which unofficially kicks off the \$115 million capital campaign he had already announced to campus a month before.

Alrighty then, this guy's got some energy, eh? Ready? Set? Go!!

"You will undoubtedly find those more talented and more intelligent than I, but you won't find anyone who will work harder for this institution than I will," the 41-year-old scholar declares.

To say he's hit the ground running is an understatement. And, by the way, it is a pun, too, given the fact he's a marathon runner in his leisure time, including the Boston Marathon. His best time of 2 hours, 41 minutes won his age division in his first appearance in the St.

President Benson (above) jokes with SUU student-athletes Eric Nilsson (left), a business management major from St. George; Matt McArthur (middle), a biology major from St. George; and SUU alum and former T-Bird golf team member Chris Stover, now the Pro at Palisades Golf Course in Sterling, Utah.

George Marathon, and in his most recent St. George run in 2003, he raised more than \$50,000 for the Snow College athletic department. "Yes!" **Elizabeth "Betsy" (Miller) Carlile** ('03 Communication) exclaims in agreement. "We're

all going to need our running shoes to keep up with President Benson.” A president herself—of the Iron County Alumni Chapter—Betsy states in light of Benson’s initiatives, and effective way of making them manifest, “SUU is in store for some big, fun and exciting moves, for sure.” After hearing of Benson’s plans for SUU, and being part of the energy and collaboration of the recent National Alumni Board meetings, Carlile says she is on cloud nine in anticipation of the great future of SUU.

Notwithstanding, the effects of Benson’s energy and intelligence; his proof of follow-through; his savvy and creativity; and his prompt advocacy of sensible change, are rippling across campus in rings that are real, refreshing and rejuvenating. “My job is to be one who makes decisions,” Benson states. “You may not agree with every one that I make, but you won’t be able to argue that I get something done.” This admission turns out to be one of his strengths. While he says, “I try not to make decisions based on popularity,” he holds the fragile understanding of the implications in the fact that you can’t please all people all the time. Ahhhh, the reality pill this Dr. is prescribing is actually pretty tasty!

This confidence in Michael Benson is not arrogant or unfounded, but certainly earned and composed. He explains that the tenacity in him is founded in the fact that “if you give me a task, I’m going to do all I can to get it done.”

The Capital Campaign, obviously one of Benson’s main goals, is just one of the components of his plan to advance

the University, which he outlined to employees and students in a Spring Engagement event on a snow-covered day at the beginning of the new semester, and really, the beginning of a new era for Southern Utah University.

“Yes, it’s an ambitious goal,” he acquiesces about the campaign’s

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monetary goal, “but I believe it is most certainly do-able, given the valuable employees who propel this institution and its very devoted alumni and friends.”

“I *am* young, but I’m old enough to understand and respect the heritage, vision and sacrifice of the founders and pioneers of this wonderful institution.

I appreciate the work of those before me and the expertise of those around me. I am honored to join those who have given so much to Southern Utah University and pledge to never forget its legacy while ensuring its future.”

One such case that stands out in his mind is a relationship forged while he served as president of Snow College the last five years. After time spent with Mr. Keith Barrett, the latter gave a generous donation toward the construction of the Eccles Center for the Performing Arts on the Snow campus. Benson took the liberty of naming the lobby of the building after Barrett’s late wife, and erected a portrait of her in the entry area. Only about 15 family members and close associates were expected to the unveiling of the portrait and grand opening of the building. Instead, more than double that number attended. And when the portrait and dedication were revealed, Benson remembers, Mr. Barrett simply sobbed tears of joy and gratefulness. “That experience taught me,” Benson says, “that it doesn’t take a lot to touch people’s lives and make a

President and Mrs. Benson at Mt. Tabor (the Mount of Transfiguration) in Jezreel Valley, Israel.



difference. I know I am a better person because I know Mr. Barrett.”

He summarizes sincerely, “I truly believe in this simple formula: higher education is the best investment anyone can make because the trickle down effect influences far beyond the individual—to our economy, entrepreneurialism, technology and society overall.”

Admittedly, one can't help but wonder what the secret of the success is of this young, vivacious, and result-getting executive. When interrogated about this gift within his persona, he suggests, humbly, that he is sensitive and "intuitive about reading people." He submits, “I do alright at getting people in the right places and forming sincere valuable relationships.”

“Michael Benson is not a one shot wonder,” **Kirk Jowers** declares. Longtime friend, and now professional colleague of Benson's, Jowers is the Director of the Hinckley Institute of Politics. “He is a student of substantive subjects, including people, and is able to blend his academic and practical knowledge in a very balanced way.” Jowers assures the community of SUU that Benson is a leader who “takes responsibility, and remains committed to something before, during and after the process.”

“You'll see a great deal of me out in the community trying to do what I believe I'm hard-wired to do: build bridges and partnerships and collaborations,” said Benson. He's met one-on-one with dozens of employees, (and plans to do that regularly), several student groups, and many individuals in the community as well as friends of SUU across the country. He and his wife, Debi, even took the previous first couple of SUU—Steve and Marj Bennion—to dinner in New York on a recent



(top) From the "early days," Benson easily took command of a crowd! Here he is the center of attention of his siblings, charming them with his innate outgoing personality. (bottom) Benson played percussion as a child in his "family band."

trip to the Bennion's mission area on Long Island. Benson sincerely seeks out the opinions and ideas of many, many others. “I am very conscientious about always trying to be fair,” he explains. “At the end of a discussion, we may have to agree to disagree, but I will listen, and hear and consider dissenting viewpoints.”

It is, indeed, intriguing to watch him work. He is clear and to the point, but also very personable and engaging. He is a leader, just as comfortable and in command in small meetings as in addressing an audience of hundreds. He is the president of one of the nation's Top 10 Universities (*Consumers Digest* magazine), yet he respectfully answers, “Yes Sir” to a selection of his colleagues, and eases any apprehension with a boyish grin and chuckle.

Students have always come first for President Benson. “If you look at my career in higher education, I think you'd be hardpressed to find many students who didn't think they were one of my priorities,” he states. Chase Palmer is certainly one former student who will likely always vouch for that. Palmer met Benson while he was a student-athlete at Snow College in 2004-06. He is now attending Oberlin College. “I think President Benson is such a successful person because one, he never puts himself above anyone else, regardless of his accomplishments or prestige. And two, to him, dreams are reality.”

Before the New Year, the President had already met with four different groups of students to frankly discuss issues ranging from student housing, tuition, and faculty retention to academics,

scholarships, and athletics. President Benson recently asked a group of students how they thought we could make SUU even better. He wholeheartedly agreed with one who said it would give him great satisfaction to come back in a few years as an alumnus and see the same professors. Benson understands that student retention, even alumni retention if you will, is highly-impacted by the retention of faculty. Moreover, he knows that their level of compensation highly impacts faculty's decision to stay teaching at SUU. "If the heart of campus is students, then the lifeblood is faculty, and I want to support faculty with resources," Benson says. "My job is to look out for my employees. They are not X, Y and Z. They are individuals. They have families."

Benson regards the mission of higher education, (i.e. to change a person), as one of the most noble, citing a university experience as the true portal to a better life. "It's the chance to be part of someone's life during a pivotal, exciting time of change." He'll testify that it's changed him, many times, and for the better.

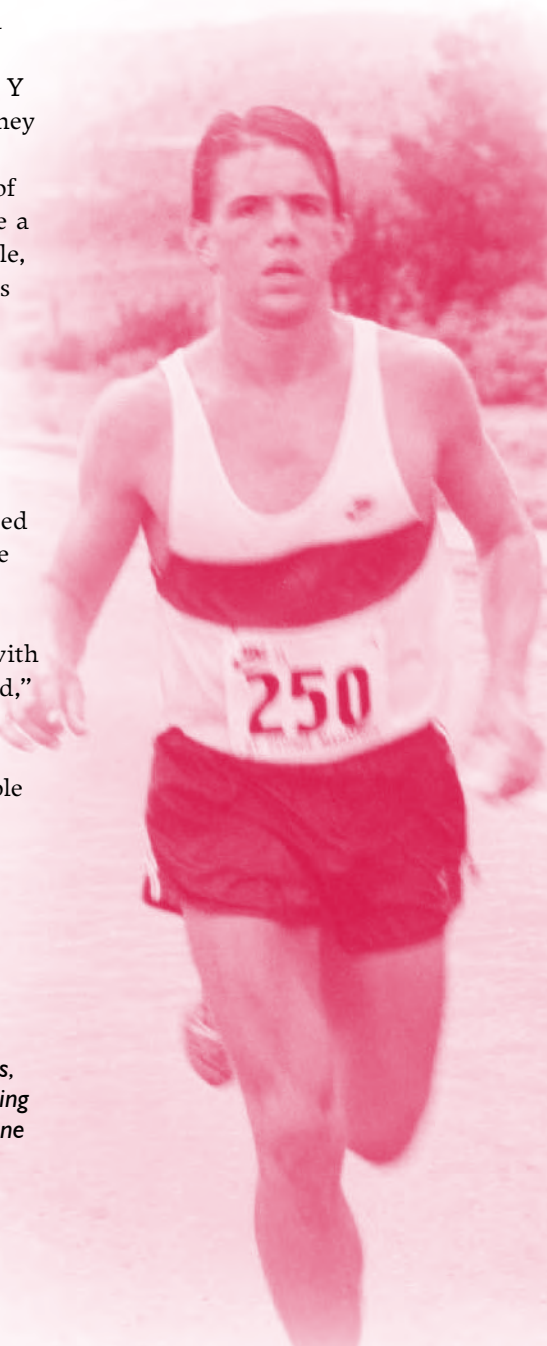
It wasn't long after he declared himself a pre-med major that he realized zoology could easily be the death of him. His stress, he recalls, "had something to do with identifying the holes in the head," he quips. He eventually earned his bachelor degree, cum laude, in political science (with a double minor in English and history) from BYU. It was during this time that he had two different and identifying experiences.

In 1983, in his first run in the St. George Marathon, Benson achieved his best time of 2 hours, 41 minutes, winning his age division, and qualifying for the Boston Marathon. He was one of 18 teenagers across the country that year to qualify for Boston.

He remembers two particular professors, and the lessons they taught him. Essentially, one who said no, and one who said yes. The pessimism of the first professor was fortunately far outshone in Benson's mind by the encouraging attitude of the second. Whenever Benson approached the latter, to ask him about anything—from what extra studying he might do to improve his grade, to questions about life—the effective teacher routinely responded "Yes!" in action, attitude, and teaching. "That taught me what kind of mentor and administrator I wanted to be."

Benson attended Oxford University for his doctoral studies and describes that time as life-changing. "Oxford was a personal test for me. I questioned and improved myself." He admits that it is in a university environment in which he feels most at home. He embraces and envelops himself in the diversity of cultures, religions and values such a community, and traveling, offers.

As an undergraduate, Benson traveled to Israel, and has been back a dozen times since. Consequently, he has developed a love of the country, so much so, that he was inspired to establish a Jewish Studies program at Snow College. World-renown author and Holocaust survivor **Elie Wiesel** attended the opening ceremony of the program in Ephraim, Utah. Coincidentally, his affinity for Israeli culture matches up nicely with the object of his admiration—namely, Harry S. Truman—Benson's hero. In fact, he wrote his dissertation on President Truman's decision to recognize the State of Israel in 1948. Benson strives to emulate Truman's leadership principles. "In my management tasks, I try to do the same as Truman; he surrounded himself with experts on a variety of subjects and amply referred to their expertise for strategic problem-solving." And like his icon, President Benson has the sign on his desk, too, that reads, "The Buck Stops Here." He admires how Truman meshed his sense of humanity into his leadership style. An example Benson regards as particularly insightful was how Truman did not hesitate to call upon former President Hoover (despite the latter's unpopularity) for his expertise in the logistics of crisis food distribution, as was the situation Truman was facing post-WWII. Benson often repeats the story of when Truman



asked Hoover for his input on a solution, Hoover actually cried and thankfully told Truman that no one had asked for his opinion on anything for years. “Did you know,” Benson beams, “that Truman went out of office at a 23 percent approval rating, and just recently was named one of the great presidents?”

Benson never forgets another defining moment in his development as a leader; he lay on the bed in his dorm room at Oxford, and as he finished the last page of David McCollough’s biography on Truman, he shut the book and said to himself: “They just don’t make public servants like that anymore.” He and Debi plan on naming the son they’re expecting this Spring, *Truman*.

Though he is not inclined to pursue politics himself at this point, he is very much intrigued by the field. He’s taught Theories of International Relations at BYU, the U.S. Presidency and International Politics at the University of Utah, and American National Government at Snow College. He wants to teach an upper division course on the American presidency, and may very well do that at SUU, as he recently received word that he had been recommended for and named a full professor of political science at SUU. “Well, look at that” he exclaimed, “I’ve never had tenure or professorship before.”

Well, he can scratch *that* off his list of things to do, and move onto the other remaining items like fly an airplane; travel to the Far East, and Australia; play as a scratch golfer (running a close second to Truman, Tiger Woods is also of heroic measure in Benson’s book. And for those of you dying of curiosity out there, he’s a 6 handicap!); play like a master pianist (owing this talent and passion to his mother, Lela, a.k.a. his piano teacher, who gave him a

truly great gift. “She is tough; we only had to practice on days we wanted to eat,” he says, only half-jokingly).

His heritage extends partly from **Ezra Taft Benson**, his late grandfather, who was a former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture and



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president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, to his brother, **Steve**, Pulitzer Prize-winning political cartoonist at the Arizona Republic. His lineage is Emma, Samuel and soon-to-be Truman Taft. “I’ve learned from my kids. They accept you for who you are and could care less about some of the small stuff we adults sweat. I admire how they respond, purely, to how they are treated.”

A person’s favorite movie and book can reveal a lot about him. Michael Benson’s favorite movie is *Chariots of Fire*. Yes, because it’s about running, but also because

the entire life story of Eric Liddle, beyond the movie’s plot, has been very inspiring to Benson. His favorite book? “What?” he pseudo-innocently responds, “You mean apart from the book I wrote?” *Harry S. Truman and the Founding of Israel*, written by Michael T. Benson, printed and published by Praeger in 1997. Okay, besides that one, his favorite is McCollough’s *Truman*, of course. Benson was absolutely thrilled, while in the process of writing his book, to spend a morning with McCollough.

“I’ve certainly been given opportunities,” President Benson says, “and I try to always honor the idea that opportunities come with responsibility. I see two of my strengths as: one, I will think and work harder than just about anyone, and two, my proclivity to surround myself with very good and able people, giving them the tools to get their jobs done, working very, very hard, and all the while, having a great time doing it!”

Benson often quotes Kingman Brewster, former president of Yale and former ambassador to Great Britain: “There is no greater challenge than to have someone relying upon you; no greater satisfaction than to vindicate his expectation.” He adds, “I’ve always loved this campus, and I’m not just saying that.” He shares a conversation he and former boss Bernie Machen, then-president of the University of Utah and now president of the University of Florida, had close to a decade ago. “Bernie said to me, ‘You need to end up at SUU, that’s the best job in the state.’”

Benson jests, “In Utopia, sure, my dream job would be Ambassador to the Court of St. James in England, or a professional golfer. But as far as reality goes, right now, I think I have the best job in America.” **SUU**