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THIS STORY

Together”

Introducing Chancellor Don Betz

First, he's a committed teacher and voracious learner.

Experience has made him a knowledgeable speaker, writer, and expert on international issues, especially the Middle East.

He's earned a reputation as an effective mentor, team builder, innovator, and leader.

The university's 16th Chancellor brings a long list of attributes to his new role.

By Kevin Bertelsen

His bike, his map collection, that old baseball mitt. Childhood possessions that were important to Don Betz. Even more—they symbolized the dreams and passions that still guide his life. The bike stood for freedom and independence; the maps represented curiosity and adventure; the mitt heralded action and engagement. All are important components of his persona. They tell us a lot about the man and the kind of leader he is.

"I love the adventure of discovery," says Betz. "I really do. I guess that's endemic to the pursuit here in the academic world, the realm of education we live in and the lifelong learning model. It's way, way deep inside me."

River Falls is his new adventure. With 34 years of experience in university-level teaching and administration, most of it in Oklahoma, Betz started his work here on July 1. He takes over from Interim Chancellor Virgil Nylander who served for a year following the death of Chancellor Ann Lydecker in March 2004. Betz was offered the position back in February by UW System President Kevin Reilly following a nation-wide search involving local and Board of Regents committees and campus interviews.

Terry Brown, search committee chair and now interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, remembers one of those question and answer sessions during the interview phase. It was for students; and one professor, hearing about Betz's background in foreign affairs, sent his international studies class. So on top of inquiries about qualifications and leadership style, Betz got this question: What is the purpose of Greenland? Without skipping a beat, Betz came through with a quick-witted, well-informed answer. Brown was impressed. "He showed us he's someone who can handle any situation. He's very comfortable with people." Long-time friend and colleague Roger Webb, president at the University

of Central Oklahoma where Betz served as provost and vice president for academic affairs, echoes that sentiment: "Don Betz is an incredibly gifted communicator—comfortable in any kind of setting—whether teaching, meeting with faculty, at an international forum, or talking to non-academics around town."

What else is "way, way deep inside" Don Betz? In a wide-ranging series of interviews for *Falcon Features*, Betz shared his life story, along with some forces that drive his work. He talked about his new role, his values, and some of the expectations he has for the university and its people. Here's what he had to say.

"I have presented on the Middle East for many years," says Betz, "and invariably when I'm speaking, somebody asks me about my ethnic background. They assume that I am either Jewish or of Arab descent because of my interest. In fact, I'm Italian-German. Half and half. My mother's side of the family is from Chicago and they're 100 percent Italian."

That's where he spent his formative years, from ages two to nine, living with his parents and younger brother Bob, near to the loads of uncles, aunts, cousins, and his maternal grandmother. "She was the matriarch. She was just the center of everybody's life. What she modeled for me was the importance of family, the importance of perspective, and she had a tremendous ability to stick to an issue, to accomplish the goal. The fact that all of her six kids grew up to be good and successful is a great testimony to her. Her passing was one of the watershed moments in all of our lives. I think the sense of family really was built around her.

"My German grandparents, on my dad's side, were salt of the earth people. If my Italian family was a bit flashy, they were stable. They were good people. So, one of the lessons I took from them was the quality of consistency and decency in relating to others."

Because his dad's parents lived in Tacoma, Washington,

one of Betz's earliest memories is of the cross-country treks to visit relatives. His dad, then a salesperson for Continental Baking Company, makers of Wonder Bread and Hostess products (that's right, Betz grew up a "Twinkie kid"), got two weeks of vacation each year, which he used to take the family west by car in the days before interstate highways.

"We'd all pile into the car in the dark of the night. I remember sitting behind him, peering over the edge of the 1949 Chevrolet, and from the glow of the instrument panel, I was filled with the anticipation of the forthcoming adventure. What was beyond the next turn, the next mile, the next state line? It seemed like I never slept. I was constantly watching the road. Some people have concluded that this was where my globe-trotting was spawned."

In 1954, Betz's father moved his nine-year-old son with the rest of the family to Seattle to pursue a management job with his company. There Betz adjusted to private school at St. Benedict's, learned Latin and became an altar boy for the bishop, welcomed younger brother Tom to the family, joined the Boy Scouts and the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO), and played baseball. He was a good student, a bright kid. He loved history and geography. He excelled in speech and debate. "I was one of those kids who when it was time to give a report, I didn't mind standing up in front of people to speak—never felt nervous. Well, that's not quite true. I would feel nervous, a sense of anxiety, until I stood up to present and then the jitters just went away."

He points to a couple of early events as being prophetic. First there was the spelling bee. "I was a great speller—a spelling bee champ kind of guy. Yet, I can still remember my mother being mortified at this major spelling bee, after we had practiced 20,000 words for weeks, and I get up—I was in the third or fourth grade—and the first word they asked me I didn't know. Little did I know at the time, however, when they asked

me the word that I was going to spend my life developing what the word signified, because the word was 'curriculum'!"

The second event was the pitching contest. "When I was 10, I won a pitching contest in the city of Seattle. So in the paper it appears: 'Whiz Pitcher Aspires to...' and I said two things. I either wanted to be a senator from the State of Washington or I wanted to work for the United Nations and make a difference. "Make a difference" is the phrase I use today to describe what I sensed at that time. I wanted to work at the United Nations and experience and connect with the world. When I arrived at the UN some 27 years later, in 1982, that boyhood dream materialized. I thought about the pitching contest, that comment, that day when I walked into the United Nations for the first time as an international civil servant.

"My dad and mom were consistently supportive and encouraging to me in academics, sports, speaking and drama. They never missed a game. From my earliest memory they declared that I was going to college, an opportunity not available to them."

Academic-based scholarship offers allowed Betz to pick and choose among colleges. He chose the University of San Francisco (USF). "In 1963 San Francisco was like Paris, London, Rome, Bangkok all rolled into one in my mind. USF is a Jesuit university, founded in 1856, great reputation, and, at that time, all men. So there were 1,900 men on the top of this hill in the middle of San Francisco, two blocks from Haight-Asbury, but USF remained a bastion of conservatism as you can imagine. My days there was one of those experiences that, with continuing reflection, I now know that I learned far more than I realized. I think it was the mental rigor that the Jesuit teachers demanded of us, the accountability that was built into the way we worked, the competition that was inherent in the quality of the student there. I learned how to learn, and then, later, I learned the value of learning."

He lobbied hard to take advantage of a year-long Rome-based program offered through a consortium of Jesuit institutions, and studied there his sophomore year. "It was just incredible. About three weeks of that year I spent in the Middle East. And that turned out to be, embedded in the Rome experience, the harbinger of what my focus would be as an adult, as an academic, and as a lifelong learner—Greece, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, which occupied the West Bank at that time. Little did I know when I was there [in 1965] that that would be at the center of my life. I remember the impression it left on me; I knew I was going to return to that world."

And he was. Back in Beirut in 1969, working on his dissertation to complete a doctoral degree in



Chancellor Betz, along with Gov. Jim Doyle, members of the Kansas City Chiefs organization, and the entire campus community, celebrate the grand opening of the Hunt-Knowles Center addition on August 1.



Susanne and Don Betz

International Studies from the University of Denver, Betz worked as a writer and assistant editor for the English-language newspaper, the *Daily Star*. Returning to Denver, his major professor put him onto a job teaching political science and international courses at a school in Oklahoma. “I ended up going down there for a year [in 1971], and then a year, and then another year. Pretty soon that turned into many, many years.” In fact, his association with Northeastern State University in Tahlequah lasted until 1994, but with lots of special assignments thrown into the mix.

One of those was his participation in the University of Pittsburgh’s Semester at Sea program. He taught in three separate four-month voyages over a span of seven years. With students from around the country, he has sailed all the way around South America, throughout the Caribbean and Mediterranean, even circumnavigating the globe on one trip. “I tried to link [class time with] activities in port. One of my courses was Political Violence and Revolution. I contacted the editors of major newspapers in each of the countries and my students and I would meet with editors and lead journalists to discuss how they covered political violence and terrorist activities. The learning process got extended way beyond the classroom. If you look at the learning curve it was almost vertical. From not knowing much nor caring much to having met people and journalists whose lives are on the line, we all found it highly instructive and, frankly, fascinating.”

In the meantime, Betz earned tenure in his early 30’s and began doing a lot of speaking and writing on international issues, largely for public consumption, as well as directing the university’s leadership program. And then the United Nations opportunity came along in 1982. “Upon the recommendation of a colleague and friend who worked for the UN, I was contacted by the first female undersecretary general to assist in putting together the first international conference on what the UN calls the question of Palestine, which is the Palestinian-

Israeli conflict. They call it the question of Palestine because the issue existed in the UN prior to the existence of the State of Israel.” In the process of preparing the 1983 conference, Betz brought together hundreds of non-governmental organizations to lend their support and expertise to conflict resolution in the Middle East. “There are so many wonderful tales of heroism and courage and determination—people whose names you’ll never hear, never know, who each in their own way have made such a tremendous impact on the process that could eventually lead to peace agreements. I think back to everyone’s excitement about the Oslo Accords in the 1990s. That really all began with regional NGOs bringing together members of the Palestinian and Israeli hierarchy who were disposed toward peace. That connection, their persistence, their mediation, made it possible. The Oslo Accords did not yield a final peace, but it was a process that made us think we were moving in the right direction.” Betz remained active with this UN program until stepping down in 2003.

Maybe the most significant event occurring during those Northeastern State days was meeting and marrying Susanne. Both worked at the university. “I had a position open, and at that time I was serving as vice president of university relations. She applied and I had the good sense to hire her.” From there the two became friends and the relationship deepened. According to Susanne, “He knew before I did. I was a bit slower at figuring it all out.” They were married in 1992. Both have similar interests—they like to travel and explore, they approach the world in much the same way, and says Susanne, Don helped her discover “a love for learning that I didn’t know I had before I met him.” They love good restaurants, good movies, good art, and even shopping together. That’s right, says Susanne, “he’s very generous. He’ll even go to a ‘chick flick’ if I want.” To Don, Susanne is his sounding board and helpmate on all kinds of projects. “Susanne is the life force in my life. She is absolutely a wonderful example of how people can be and how they can treat each other. She’s a great role model.

She's my best friend." Each brought a child to the marriage. Their daughter Sarah, an early grade elementary school teacher, is married and recently moved to Farmington, Minn. Son Nick lives in Edmond, Okla., just finished his MBA, and is a public information officer for the Oklahoma Department of Transportation.

In 1994 Don and Susanne moved to Davenport, Iowa, where he became provost and vice president for academic affairs at Palmer College of Chiropractic. There, among other initiatives, he established the Palmer Center for Chiropractic Research and helped secure the first National Institutes of Health grant for a chiropractic college. Then it was back to Oklahoma and a position with the same title at the University of Central Oklahoma where, says Dr. Bill Radke, who took

7:30 a.m. to well after 5 p.m. in the office, followed by dinner, and then hours of "homework"—reading, planning, writing—before tucking himself in late at night. But he doesn't see it as work. "I really live my work. But for me you have to understand that this is not a 'job'—never has been a job. Where do you separate that you've spent 16 hours yesterday 'working,' when major parts of the day were being involved with people who you'd just as soon be involved with—students, faculty, staff, and members of the community?"

Ask anyone and they will tell you Betz is a great teacher. He has the awards to prove it, but more than that he has a deep and abiding awe about the process.

"Teaching is like a dance. When the rhythm is right, and the partner is right, you create an outcome that you would never have anticipated. I think the magic of teaching is the magic of connection. I've used the term 'magic' often in describing teaching, and people say 'well, you know, that's a very imprecise term.' I disagree. There is something that we can't explain that happens in real teaching and real learning. That's why we continue to study it, and measure it, and reassess it, and we must continue to do so. But at the same time I don't ever want us to strip the magic out of this very special connection that evolves between the committed teacher and the curious learner. It's the reason why in 1874 someone built this fine institution. I think real teachers are true gifts to society."

In order to "create and live the UW-River Falls that everyone has in their hearts," says Betz, will require some effective team building, leadership development, and concerted efforts to model such values as trust and integrity. He's already initiated an inclusive process to define our core values, mission and vision. On team building: "Here is the crucial point. Worthwhile results occur

because there are good people ready to step up and form the right team in order to produce the result. One of the true rewards is watching the team come together—watching a group of people who are talented become a talented team committed to one another and to the project at hand. And that doesn't happen easily, and it doesn't happen quickly. But when it does, the result is a sum that makes the parts look miniscule. You end up with this value-added outcome." On leadership: "Everyone's leadership style should be a reflection of their personality and their experience and their sense of the relationship with the people with whom they work. I guess mine is fairly open, collaborative, transparent, founded on pretty strong ideals about what we can accomplish, but understanding full well



Chancellor Betz addressing more than 500 faculty and staff at the opening day meeting, August 22.

over Betz's job once Betz left for River Falls, "he did more in six years than most vice presidents accomplish in a whole career. From a new intellectual property policy to the American Democracy Project to the A+ schools program, he has a list of achievements as lengthy as your arm is long."

Now he's brought his passions, values, principles and energies to UW-River Falls.

At 60, blessed with good health and committed to a daily exercise routine, he's not worried about ticking-clock syndrome—that feeling that time is running out. Yet he is focused on cramming in as much as possible, says Susanne, who describes him as very hyper, always on the move. "I don't think he's ever taken a nap," she adds. His workday often runs from

that no one accomplishes anything alone.” On trust: “The only way I know how to earn trust is to be trustworthy. One of my goals is for the River Falls community, as far as it extends around the world, to come to know Susanne and me, and that we have the opportunity to learn about and from one other. From those interactions, over time, trust should develop.” On integrity: “I believe that the point we are trying to reach in our lives is where our public self and our private self are exactly the same. Somewhere in there is where integrity lies.”

Betz plans to “lead from the middle.” That’s his way of saying that every individual, every segment of the UW-River Falls community has a role to play in advancing the university. “And an aspect of my role is to serve as the external voice for the institution—someone who articulates the values, mission and vision—and someone who is able to model the behavior that we hope to champion here at the university. I think one of the most difficult challenges for leaders and for organizations is to decide what not to do, because we simply cannot and should not do everything. There have to be priorities. We have to make them in our lives; we have to make them for the institution. The financial realities are such that we may feel we are being forced to make these choices, but we should be making them anyway. My greatest opportunity is to reflect the ideals and the quality of the people who are here. To the extent that I can do that well, I can serve the university.

“UW-River Falls is an institution blessed with talented people—a distinguished and student-oriented faculty and an equally dedicated and competent staff. The possibilities are endless. We now have to build the team together. That’s the challenge.

“My broad stroke goals? To increase public engagement; to help students learn; to educate leaders and citizens; to forge a team that extends deep into the university community that cares about one another, that is known for their expertise, but also for their compassion; to help build a learning community that students and friends will come to regard as a most inviting educational environment; to bring the world to River Falls and take River Falls to the world. In this globalized era, we can do no less.”

Betz often borrows an expression he first heard from Jack Kaufman, a friend and benefactor of Northeastern State University where Betz worked for many years. It speaks to a kind of “twilight perspective,” one that seems to come with age and the transition of knowledge into wisdom. The expression is engraved into a bench on the Northeastern campus that memorializes Kaufman’s contributions. It reads: “He left the woodpile a little bit higher.”

“I remember Jack talking about that,” says Betz. “And we all do that in our own way. Some leave the woodpile a little bit higher by the quality of their character. Some do it by amassing the kinds of resources they can share with others. And still others by helping us all learn. What a wonderful way to be remembered. What an enduring legacy.”

That, says Betz, is why he is here at UW-River Falls—to leave the woodpile a little bit higher. ■



What Others Say about Don Betz

What qualities does he possess? Don has a good heart. He’s a person of honor and absolute integrity. He’s consistent and steadfast. He’s solid. He has an ability to see the future to see opportunities that will accrue to the benefit of people and the institution. He will make an impact very quickly, because he’s never satisfied with the status quo or mediocrity.

Roger Webb, long-time friend and colleague,
President of the University of Central Oklahoma

Don has a tremendous talent for engaging a room when he speaks. You will feel he is talking directly to you. He will have a great presence on campus; he will be a highly visible chancellor. Don will run himself ragged to show his support for people on campus. He will sit back, listen, get the pulse of the institution before he moves ahead. And he will see opportunities that people close to the university may not see.

Dr. Bill Radke,
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs,
University of Central Oklahoma

I remember reading a comment from a session evaluation. It said, He’ll be the engine of the campus. I think that is a good description. From the first phone conversation through the entire search process, he impressed me as someone who is consistently principle driven. His words are integrated with his behavior he’s about walking the talk. There is no disconnect between what he says and what he does.

Dr. Terry Brown, chair of the Chancellor Search Committee,
Interim Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, UW-River Falls