

WHO IS LESTER LEFTON?

Lester Lefton, the highly scrutinized, seemingly elusive president of Kent State University, is – contrary to popular belief – a very real human being. In 70 minutes of pure candor, he meets with The Burr to talk about his salary, his escape, his popularity (or, at times, lack thereof) and why he once quit college.

BY ANTHONY DOMINIC (CLASS OF 2013)

DECEMBER 2012 ISSUE

TOP 10 NATIONAL FINALIST, *Personality Profile*
Hearst Journalism Awards Program

Lester Lefton is looking back at me, laughing. We're standing in his office on the second floor of the Kent State University Library, overlooking Risman Plaza, where hundreds of students are waiting in line for tickets to see President Barack Obama, who will be campaigning on campus in two days.

Lefton, 66, is taller and more robust than he appears in photos. He's wearing a plaid, button-up shirt with navy slacks. A pair of thinly framed eyeglasses rest on the bridge of his nose, and a long, striped tie hangs from his collar.

A dozen photographs are sprawled across the conference table between us – his photos. Photography is Lefton's 50-year, yet little-known passion, and he is ecstatic to speak of it. As we circle the table, the admitted "gear geek," who launched a photography website in June, is telling me about his photographs ("artistic expressions," he calls them) and his influences (Trey Ratcliff, Colby Brown and Henri Cartier-Bresson, to name a few). As he speaks, I look more closely, and I begin to see each photograph as a window into Lefton's arcane world.

"Photography, for me, is not a representation of reality," he says, in what's left of his Boston accent. "I try and interpret the world as I see it, and often what you see and what I see is very different."

Lefton's photos are highly stylized. It's called high dynamic range imaging – a technique based on the manipulation of colors and lighting in post production.

"There's something mechanical to me about just shooting a landscape and having it reproduced perfectly," he says. "This allows me to express the world the way I want to see it through my eyes."

His skies aren't blue; they're lapis lazuli, alive and ocean-like. His grass isn't green; it's a seething sea of shamrock, lush and vibrant. Most of all, his photographic world isn't reality. Reality is a faculty union, divided on a vote of no confidence. It's a student body, convinced its president is disconnected and overpaid. It's an all-consuming job to keep a \$750 million institution afloat, despite constant criticism and shrinking state support.

I first met Lefton on a windy September afternoon in Twinsburg. It was the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the Kent State University

“IT’S VERY EASY TO SAY ‘NO MORE TUITION INCREASES EVER!’ IT WOULD MAKE ME VERY POPULAR, RIGHT? I’D BE KING AS WE CLOSED THE DOORS OF THE NURSING SCHOOL.”

Lester Lefton
Kent State University President

something changed. His shoulders slouched, his mouth tightened and his eyes sank. Everything about the man was different. As the meeting carried on, I watched as he shifted in his seat and fidgeted with his hands. He appeared uneasy, as if absorbed in some thought. (Or he was just absurdly bored.)

Having recently polled Kent State undergraduate students, I was reminded that many perceive Lefton as non-genuine, a well-rehearsed actor, motivated only by money. Well, is that what it had been? Just another performance? Was I a firsthand witness to the contrived dichotomy that is Lester Lefton?

After the meeting, Eric Mansfield, executive director of University Media Relations, led me through the high-profile crowd for the big moment. Lefton and I exchanged a firm handshake. I said it was good to finally meet, and I thanked him for agreeing to sit down and talk with me later that month.

“Yeah, well, that’s what I do,” he said bluntly. “Talk.”

Someone else caught Lefton’s attention, and a moment later he was being whisked away.

“I’ll see you in a few weeks, Anthony,” he said, turning back.

And that was it.

In that moment, I realized, despite my efforts, I may never learn who Lester Lefton really is.

But I will learn who he is not.

He’s not Holden Thorp — the soon-to-be former chancellor of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Thorp’s recent resignation, effective at the end of the 2012-2013 academic year, followed a series of controversies, including the alleged misuse of university funds, concerns about course quality and a NCAA investigation into the misconduct of university football players.

“Everybody said, ‘This guy’s a rock star!’ He’s like the Christ of presidents! He’s, like, unbelievable!” Lefton says of Thorp, as we return to our seats across the office. “[He] was considered a rock star, the ‘Madonna,’ who everyone thought was, like, the best president known to humankind because he was so in-touch with everyone.”

He pauses.

“Four years. Four years,” he repeats, referring to the length of Thorp’s chancellorship.

Lefton rattles off a long list of other short-lived public university presidents, including former University of Tulsa President Geoffrey Orsak, who was fired without reason after 74 days.

This is what keeps Lefton up at night, literally. This is why he tosses, turns and stares at the ceiling. This is why he has asked himself the same question every day for six years, while in the car, in the shower, on the elliptical. It’s the question he’s expected to solve. It’s the question he’s so highly compensated to solve: “What is right?”

“What is right for our students?” he expounds. “What’s right for Kent State? What’s right for Ohio? What’s right for America?”

Lefton says the answer “isn’t always what a 19-year-old journalism student might see because he doesn’t know [what’s right].”

“For example,” he begins. “If I were to ask your average 19-year-old journalism student, ‘And what did [the College of] Podiatric Medicine bring to Kent State?’ They’d go, ‘That was a waste of time and money.’ And [the College of] Public Health? They just don’t understand. And there aren’t enough hours in the day for me to educate every student about every decision that I make.”

As Lefton speaks, it’s obvious he’s not acting; he’s opinionated and often curt in his delivery. I see why the Aldridge Group called him “prickly,” “thin-skinned” and not “overly warm” in his 2012 performance review. (This is the same firm that praised his strengths in “strategic thinking,” “persistence” and “leadership.”) As Lefton points out, the media often “reduce presidents to their salaries.” While I can conclude that few would put a \$409,608 price tag on his personality, Lefton reminds me that he’s not evaluated for his per-

sonality; he’s evaluated for his effectiveness as president and CEO. And each year he has held those titles, he has been granted his full performance bonus by the Board, which was \$102,402 this year.

“[My salary’s] got nothing to do with how well I do my job,” he says in regard to critics. “So, they would have liked me if I were only making \$30,000 a year?”

If Lefton is overpaid, all public university presidents are overpaid — grossly. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State University, has a base salary of \$814,000; however, his bonuses and deferred compensation push his annual intake to nearly \$2 million. But, as Lefton notes, in size, Ohio State (64,429 students at six campuses) is not twice as large as Kent State (42,513 students at eight campuses).

Lefton says the media coverage of his compensation can be a “wildly misleading cheap shot” and “doesn’t talk about what a president does or the results or quality of the institution.” He adds that an average student doesn’t have the basis for judging his performance because they are likely “really clueless” as to what he actually does.

Which, as it turns out, is fundraising. It’s why he was hired and why the trustees still love him. Since his appointment in 2006, Lefton has consistently demonstrated an uncanny ability to appeal to alumni, investors and the general public. In September he closed the two-year, \$265 million Centennial Campaign, the largest fundraising initiative in Kent State’s history.

If Lefton were merely the well-rehearsed actor, what are the donors who contributed to the campaign? Fools? Lefton says the only reason his fundraising initiatives have been successful is because he’s not acting.

“I actually believe in what’s going on at Kent State, and I can speak about it for hours on end with passion and enthusiasm,” he says. “I’m the orchestra conductor. I don’t actually make the music, but if I do my job well, hopefully all the moving parts work better together and we get a better symphony. And I think that is, in fact, the case. And that is what the Board, in fact, thinks.”

While Lefton is not directly responsible for changes in tuition, curricula and contracts, issues in these key areas have contributed to his declining popularity among students and faculty. Under Kent State’s recent tuition hike, in-state undergraduates enrolled in 11 to 17 credit hours now pay \$9,672 per academic year. This is a 3.5 percent increase, the largest allowed by state law. And students taking more than 17 credit hours must pay an additional overload fee of \$440 per credit hour.

Frustrations over rising costs culminated with an April 12 student protest in Risman Plaza (right below Lefton’s office windows), where signs reading, KASICH AND LEFTON SITTING IN A TREE, and, NO CHILD LEFTON BEHIND, could be seen as the crowd chanted, “We are the 99 — Lefton is the 1 percent!” My most vivid memory: a flattened Cap’N Crunch box that read, I CAN’T EVEN AFFORD A REAL SIGN.

“There’s a saying,” Lefton says, clearing his throat. “‘Everyone who has gone to college thinks they know how to run a college.’ And the truth is they don’t. Your typical student only knows that I raise tuition. Well, the truth is I don’t raise tuition; the Board of Trustees raises tuition.”

He raises his arms.

“It’s very easy to say ‘No more tuition increases ever!’ It would make me very popular, right? I’d be king as we closed the doors of the nursing school.”

Lefton retorts that many of the students’ grievances are actually with the faculty, not the administration.

“The faculty determine requirements, what courses [students]

should be taking, the rules to change majors,” Lefton argues. “The faculty decide [students] need 157 credits to get a chemistry degree, not the Board of Trustees or me.”

Many of these faculty members Lefton speaks of are still bitter after a long year on the job without a contract. The Board of Trustees only recently approved a new three-year deal for tenure-track faculty, entitling instructors to back pay and a 2 percent pay increase moving forward. In April, before a deal was reached, members of Kent State’s faculty union, a university-exclusive branch of the American Association of University Professors, proposed endorsing a petition of no confidence against Lefton. While the petition never led to a vote, and even a successful vote does not remove a president from office, it is a serious benchmark.

However, when given the opportunity to speak about Lefton, Paul Farrell and Thomas Janson, faculty senate chair and senator, respectively, did not return my phone calls. Even other phone calls regarding Lefton, including several to Kent entrepreneur Ron Burbick, went unreturned. Lefton has gone on record about himself; why won’t anyone else? The one place his critics can be consistently found: largely anonymous comment sections on KentWired.com.

I lean in closer to Lefton.

“Well, let me ask you this: Is it unfair to say you’re a bottom-line president?”

A smile spreads across his face.

“You say that in a pejorative way. I say it with some pride.”

“You are a bottom-line president.”

Lefton leans forward. We’re nose-to-nose.

“What is a bottom-line president?” he asks.

“You’re here solely to fulfill duties set forth by the Board of Trustees — which hired you.”

The smile returns, wider this time.

“Then I’m a bottom-line president.”

A moment of silence passes. Then another. We both lean back. I’m writing “bottom-line” over and over in my notebook. I want him to speak first. He does.

“I’m running a large multi-million dollar corporation. I’m not Madonna. But more than that, I’m not a [public relations] agent. I’m not here to fill a chair and make everybody happy. The Board is paying me a lot of money to accomplish certain goals. And if people like me along the way, that’s great. But it’s very easy for people who have never talked to me, including students, who have never spent a minute with me alone, to go, ‘Oh, he’s a jerk.’”

Lefton laughs.

“They don’t know whether I’m a jerk or not.”

“I guess that proposes the problem,” I say. “The impossible situation. If you were to go out and—”

“Then I wouldn’t get anything done,” he finishes.

“I have a very optimistic view of the world,” Lefton announces, as he returns from his minifridge with a can of Diet Coke. “A very realistic one. I’m in a realistic job that deals with real politics, but my inner soul is much more optimistic.”

Between long swigs, Lefton explains that his “rose-colored” outlook comes from his mother, Sylvia, who never believed in worrying. (“You’ll find the right girl, and it will all work out — that kind of thing,” he says.) From his father, Bernard, he was taught that conscientious hard work and focus would win the day.

When Lefton was growing up in Boston, his parents owned and operated a photography business; Bernard did the shooting, and Sylvia did the bookkeeping. As a teenager, he served as his father’s

“I’M RUNNING
A LARGE MULTI-
MILLION DOLLAR
CORPORATION. I’M
NOT MADONNA. BUT
MORE THAN THAT,
I’M NOT A [PUBLIC
RELATIONS] AGENT.
I’M NOT HERE TO FILL
A CHAIR AND MAKE
EVERYBODY HAPPY.”

Lester Lefton
Kent State University President

assistant, learning how to compose shots and develop cut-sheet film. By 17, he was a “full-fledged photographer,” and he spent his weekends shooting portraits, bar mitzvahs and weddings.

“I was pretty good,” Lefton laughs. “I had my own tuxedo.”

When he was 19, a sophomore at Northeastern University, his father died. Lefton abruptly quit college and returned home to take over the family business. Three months later, in the midst of “figuring out what to do,” his mother died.

“I could have made a living at [photography],” Lefton says as he straightens his tie. “But I’m the first in my family to go to college. So, that was part of, ‘Well, what would Dad have wanted?’”

Lefton sold the business in the summer of 1965 and returned to Northeastern in the fall.

“I just couldn’t see myself taking baby pictures for the rest of my life,” he says.

Today, Lefton takes the pictures he wants to take; he sees things the way he wants to see them. Is there a happy medium between “the Christ of presidents” and the bottom-liner? Probably. But it’s not Lester Lefton, and it’s not going to be. And it’s not because he’s a bad person;

it’s because the Board of Trustees and the public hold, on some level, fundamentally different expectations for the president.

“The Board expects [Lefton] to be spending more and more time out in the northeast Ohio community meeting and interacting with business leaders, as well as lobbying for the University in Columbus and Washington — in between visiting with high-potential alumni donors,” writes Gary Kustis, an Aldridge Group management consultant, in Lefton’s 2012 performance review.

Kustis suggests that not only will Lefton “need direction on where to balance these competing demands,” but the Board must “appreciate that large strides in these areas may not be possible.” Kustis also concludes that “the Board’s direction to him to raise promotion and tenure standards helped to create the tension he is now dealing with.”

Lester Lefton, the pitchman, the comedian, the cheerleader, the consultant — the embattled optimist — is in the midst of a six-year, high-wire act. The stakes are high, the crowd is restless and the wire only tightens with each step. This is why Lefton’s nights are sleepless; yet this is why his world must remain rose-colored.

“It’s always there,” he says. “It doesn’t go away. In a large, public university, where you’ve been given this trust, it’s a privilege, and it’s a burden.”

As I walk out the door of Lefton’s office, I have to wonder: Which was it today? After a few steps, I glance back. Lefton’s still lingering outside his door. He’s grinning, as if he has his own private joke. Then, the hallway bends, I meet the exit, and he’s gone. **B**