FULL CIRCLE

Carl and Lynne Kohrt form a dynamic new leadership team for Furman.

By Jim Stewart

Back in 1965, while Carl Kohrt was completing his senior year as a chemistry major under the watchful eye of such legendary Furman professors as Stuart Patterson, John Southern and Don Kuhler, his wife, Lynne, was the department assistant.

She was often joined at her post by their young son, Kris, who would sit propped in a seat beside her desk as she oversaw the office’s daily operations. Kris must have absorbed something along the way, because in 1984 he would earn his own Furman degree.

Now fast forward 30 more years. Sarah Kohrt, Kris’ daughter (and one of Carl’s and Lynne’s 10 grandchildren), is looking at colleges, with Furman on her list. And her grandparents, who have known each other since childhood, had their first date at band camp and are unabashedly each other’s best friends, have returned to work at the place where they began their lives as a married couple.

Only this time it’s in a more prominent capacity: as Furman’s interim First Couple.

When Rod Smolla resigned as president effective July 1, the board of trustees acted quickly to tap one of its own: Carl Kohrt, son of two educators, 1965 Furman graduate (and 2009 honorary degree recipient), holder of a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago and a master’s degree from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, longtime executive with Eastman Kodak, and former head of Battelle, one of the nation’s largest nonprofit independent research and development organizations.

In announcing the appointment, Richard Cullen ’71, chair of the board, said that Kohrt was the “immediate and unanimous choice” and called him “a strong leader and a really bright guy, with great academic credentials and an exemplary record of business leadership. We’ll be in good hands.”

The way Kohrt describes the “ask” dovetails nicely with Cullen’s and the board’s evident confidence in their decision. “They said that Rod had submitted his resignation and asked me point-blank if I would consider being interim,” says Kohrt. “My immediate response was that Lynne and I had been married 51 years, and it might be best to check with her first.”

Her reaction: “She literally said, ‘Well, it’s Furman. We can make it work.’ And so I went back and told them they could have us as long as they need us.”

Together the Kohrts give Furman, in the words of trustee David Ellison ’72, a presidential team that is “warm, gregarious and easy to be with. Both Carl and Lynne absolutely adore Furman. Carl has been on the board for a long time [including a term as chair], and when you combine his knowledge of Furman with his corporate background, business savvy and academic credentials, he has all the qualities we need.”

Those qualities include a quiet confidence in his ability to move the university forward. Kohrt says, “I’ve been in leadership positions, for whatever reason, since high school, and I’ve found that I can generally motivate a group to do what’s right. It’s all about people — how you treat them, listen to them, respect them. You don’t always have to agree, but you can find ways to work together.”
As an example he cites his years in China with Eastman Kodak, where he forged a major partnership while developing and expanding the company's Asian market. The experience, he says, taught him to better understand how to deal with people, organizations and cultures. He recalls a senior Chinese official telling him that the success of their relationship hinged on their mutual realization that, "If we are to go forward together, we must look backward together."

WHEN HE LOOKS BACK on his Furman experience, Kohrt says, "Furman has definitely grown on me over time, in terms of the value I put on what I learned." He gives credit to the chemistry department and particularly to Patterson, his primary mentor. But then his thoughts shift as he reflects on the influence of other professors.

"If it hadn't been for Stuart Patterson I'd have been an English major," he says, recalling John Crabtree's Shakespeare class as a highlight. Winston Babb in the history department gets a nod, as does religion professor Edgar McKnight's Old Testament course. "I still have the notes from his class," Kohrt says, adding that he and Lynne used those notes to teach a church youth group during their years in Rochester, NY.

He chuckles as he remembers math professor Reece Blackwell's advice on how to learn calculus: "Go home, get something to eat and work problems. It's fun." And he continues to marvel at Ray Nanney's organizational skills and ability to "fill a blackboard, move to the next, and by the end of class have three perfectly full boards."

Those and other experiences helped inspire him an appreciation for the value of lifelong learning and the liberal arts. Recently, in fact, Kohrt enrolled in a MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) in advanced calculus, both to test himself and to see what the discipline is like today. He says he was able to complete the class — although he prefers not to reveal his grade. But since he was a magna cum laude graduate of Furman and a National Science Foundation Graduate Fellow, he gets the benefit of the doubt.

The Furman influence remained strong, he says, through his rise into the top executive ranks at Eastman Kodak, where he worked for 29 years and was responsible for research laboratories on four continents, and on to Ohio-based Battelle, which he presided over for eight years before retiring in 2008. With both companies he earned widespread respect for his innovative thinking, people skills and ability to get things done.

At Battelle he was applauded for forging STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) partnerships between Ohio State University and local schools, and for his work with such organizations as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. When he retired, Ohio Rep. Deborah Pryce entered a laudatory commentary about his contributions into the Congressional Record. She said, "The way to judge one's impact on an organization or community is to measure one's personal and corporate accomplishments. Through this lens, it is easy to conclude that Carl has been an outstanding leader... [he] has made a significant difference."
THE KOHRT NAME graces the main commons area in Furman’s Townes Center for Science. It was endowed by Carl and Lynne in memory of Carl’s parents, Carl and Catherine Traughber Kohrt. They have also been longtime backers of the chemistry department’s undergraduate research program, in which Carl was one of the earliest participants. The Partners Scholarship Program, athletics department (he played football and basketball his freshman year) and other areas have benefited from their support as well.

Now he and Lynne are extending their generosity and talents into new areas. In what could have been a period of uncertainty, they are providing direction and stability while energizing the campus with their eagerness and enthusiasm. Two immediate objectives: to complete the Because Furman Matters capital campaign (page 14) and to move forward with a Smolla-initiated project in which faculty, administrators and trustees meet regularly to examine such issues as tuition, financial aid, budgeting and costs.

Indeed, admission and financial aid strategies are key elements of the early Kohrt agenda. He and Lynne have dropped in on campus tours to meet and greet prospective Paladins, tell their Furman stories and learn firsthand what today’s students are looking for in a college. Carl has also met with faculty, staff and alumni, asking for their thoughts and input.

He wants to make sure that Furman understands what kind of message it is sending during a time in which costs and return on investment are paramount concerns for families with college-age children.

In short, he hopes to find the common themes in what people know and think about Furman, and to incorporate those beliefs into the “T-shirt message” that will give students a clear impression of the challenges, opportunities, benefits and, especially, the value of a Furman education.

When Furman awarded Carl Kohrt an honorary Doctor of Science degree in 2009, the citation emphasized his “humility, humor, strength and benevolence” — qualities that the board of trustees knew would serve Furman well. Just as telling are the words of George Fisher, former head of Eastman Kodak, who once described Kohrt as “one of those individuals who combines the genius of a great scientist, the common sense of a great business person and the heart of a great human being.” [F]

Can you find Carl Kohrt in this photo of distinguished members of the Class of ’65 who received awards for graduate study? Hint: Think lab coat. The photo appeared in the Summer 1965 issue of The Furman University Magazine. Among the prospective doctors, lawyers, teachers and business leaders you can also find two future Furman professors, economist Dick Stanford (front row, far left), who provided the photo from his family archives, and philosopher Jim Edwards (back row, second from right). Photo by Neil Gillespie.