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Q & A With Jason Donnelly

Furman University

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Q & A WITH JASON DONNELLY



Jason Donnelly joined Furman last August as athletics director.



You were a highly successful fundraiser for Villanova Athletics. How important is fundraising to athletics success?

JD: If you look at sustained excellence among collegiate athletics programs, there is one common theme – outstanding coaches and student-athletes, exceptional institutional leadership, and consistent philanthropic support. Our sustained success at Villanova was the direct result of these three things, as well as an unwavering commitment to the mission, vision and values of the university. Successful fundraising directly contributes to improved recruiting, culture and institutional commitment, which ultimately impacts winning and sustained success in sports.

You were an assistant basketball coach before working in athletics administration. How does having been a coach impact your decision-making now?

JD: As an assistant basketball coach, I worked for Hall of Fame-bound Coach Jay Wright, who embodied the essence of a values-driven leader. Every decision he made was in the best interest of our student-athletes, our team and the university.

We were constantly working to be a part of something bigger than ourselves in an environment where everyone's roles were different but status was the same. As a leader, I make decisions in a similar way. I assess situations that our athletics department is responsible for and lean on my experiences as a student-athlete, coach and administrator. I am laser-focused on our values to ensure that we are contributing to Furman's mission and vision. Our responsibility as a department is to graduate complete student-athletes, compete to win championships, operate in a culture of compliance and collaboration, and raise revenues and manage expenses. If we adhere to these objectives and make values-driven decisions, then we will take care of the best interests of Furman University.

What is the best and worst advice you've ever gotten?

JD: Fortunately, I have received plenty of great advice throughout the years but cannot remember – or did not follow – too much bad advice. The best advice that I received was from my mother, who had an amazing outlook on life. My mother's focus for my sister and me was simply to be the

best people that we could be, to work hard in school and to treat everyone right – the Golden Rule. As a single parent, my mother encouraged us to be optimistic, to expect the best in everyone we meet and to believe that anything is possible. She had incredible personal relationships and always made acquaintances feel better about themselves. My mother encouraged us to be lifelong learners and to never take a day or an opportunity for granted. Unfortunately, my mother passed away at a young age from cancer when I was 19 years old. But the advice that I took from her made me the person that I am today.

Who are the three people you admire most and why?

JD: There are so many people I admire. The first group of people that I think of are all the incredible coaches and leaders that I played for, worked for or worked with. From this group, I was particularly blessed to have the opportunity to work for Naismith Hall of Fame Basketball Coach Morgan Wootten from

DeMatha High School. I spent several years learning values, leadership, strategy, culture and points of instruction from Coach Wootten. His core values – God, family, academics and basketball – competitiveness and care for people are second to none and were instrumental in my growth as a leader. Former Muhlenberg College Dean of Students Rudy Ehrenberg is also a person I admire a great deal. He has a military background and was an educator who could truly connect with his students through his commitment to supporting their interests and their lives. He was everywhere on campus when I was a college student, and you could see that he truly cared. We still stay in touch, and he is one of the primary reasons I chose a career as an administrator in higher education.

Father Rob Hagan, Villanova senior associate athletics director and team chaplain, is another leader who I admire. Father Rob is the strength and inspiration for the entire athletics department at Villanova. His ability to share and communicate his faith has impacted thousands of student-athletes, coaches, alumni and friends throughout the years. He has an incredible perspective on life and has a unique way of connecting the power of Augustinian teachings through the platform of university and

athletics life. He has impacted my faith in so many ways that I cannot fully express.

When you were younger, what did you want to be when you grew up?

JD: When I was younger, I wanted to be a sports writer, an architect or a professional athlete. I'm fortunate to have earned a liberal arts and sciences education and pursued a career that allowed me to fulfill so many of these different interests. Although they may differ in title, serving as a teacher, coach and administrator has afforded me the opportunity to influence others through my thoughts, actions and words. Most importantly, I wanted to be a dedicated father and husband. Of all the roles that I serve in life, this is most important to me.

Editor's note: Just before press time, we asked Donnelly about the spring season being canceled because of COVID-19.

JD: The decision to suspend and ultimately cancel spring sports at Furman was difficult and emotional, particularly for our senior student-athletes. However, I've been inspired by our university's commitment to prioritizing our community's health and safety. As challenging as this time period has been, Furman will grow stronger and more together from these circumstances. ♦

NOW



JESSE TOMPKINS '20

As a philosophy major, I often begin my papers with a question. "What is beauty? What is art? Who is God?" And so on. Naturally, when I was asked to write this column, the first question that came to my mind was, "What is Furman?"

For those outside of Furman, one might answer this question by saying "an institute of higher learning" or "a private liberal arts college in Greenville, South Carolina," but for those of us who attend the university, the answer is so much more. The beautiful thing about being a student at Furman is that everyone's experience looks different, but we are each taught to make meaning from that experience and use it as a guide for a life worth living.

For me, Furman is the place that gave me the space to discover who I am and what I want to contribute to the world. In my time here, I have studied abroad in Europe, conducted research with my favorite professor, held impactful leadership positions and made my closest friends. I have been given resources and opportunities to reflect on my identity, learn from the diverse experiences of others through

dialogue, and feel valued because of my individual contributions to a larger community.

A Furman education is truly transformative. We try to give a name to this kind of experience, perhaps by calling it The Furman Advantage, but the reality is that it cannot be named. Every student thinks of something different when he or she hears the word "Furman," and no matter how many descriptors of a Furman experience one may list, it is impossible to fully capture what it means. Furman is a place of belonging, a place of growth, a place that leaves with us.

After I graduate in May, I plan to pursue a career in higher education. College means something different for everyone, but a good college creates meaning that is cherished for a lifetime. I have felt a strong sense of community at Furman, and I hope to provide that same opportunity for future college students during my career.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jesse Tompkins '20 is president of the Student Government Association. ♦