

Coxford welcomes 'opportunity to serve'

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Paul Mayne, Western News

Western University will never be Stephen Coxford's first love. But that doesn't mean the institution didn't play a key role in shaping the incoming chairman of Western University's Board of Governors.

"Your first love is your first university," Coxford said sitting in the Great Hall, beneath the portraits of his board chair predecessors. "I have had this conversation with (former Western President) Paul Davenport. He would say, 'I am a Stanford man, always will be.'"

But when the opportunity arose, this proud graduate of the University of Toronto jumped at the chance to give back to Western, a place he considers his second – and, arguably, most career-defining – home.

Fresh out of U of T, Coxford arrived at Western in 1974 to attend Western Law. He would graduate three years later and return to Toronto to practice. That would be the last Western would hear from him for nearly two decades.

"Like a lot of graduates of this – or any other – university," he said, "I was disengaged from it for a long time, probably well over 20 years."

Coxford, now president of the Toronto-based investment firm Gresham & St. Andrew Inc., practiced law for 14 years before transitioning into other careers in managing and investing. He has served on the boards of a variety of private and public corporations and industry trade associations. Recently, he was the vice-chair of the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (TVOntario).

Beyond an occasional cheque to the law school, or a periodic guest lecture appearance, Coxford didn't have the time or the inclination for university nostalgia. But circumstances change.

"Like a lot of people, part of the reason for my disengagement was you get caught up in career and you don't have a perspective to look back on what you gained here," he said. "But after I had been away from the university and the law school for some time, I got to a stage in my career where I had occasion to pause and think about what I gained here.

"There is not a day that goes by where I am not reminded of the value of what I learned in law school – the training and the experience."

Further reflection led to him wanting to give back even more. A lunch with Davenport and former vice-president (external) Ted Garrard led to an invitation to join the board in 2006. He accepted. And this week, he'll become the 25th Board of Governors chairman, taking over from Frank Angeletti, who has served in the role since 2009.

A professional and personal flexibility, one not afforded to his younger self, now allows Coxford to pursue this important leadership position in the university's governance. He

looks forward to playing his part in pushing the broad themes that define Western's strategic plan.

"It's a great opportunity to serve. I hope it doesn't sound trite as people always talk about giving back. But it really is true," he said.

Speaking in an empty Great Hall last week, he remembered fondly eating meals in the room when it was a dining hall. He took note of the oil paintings ringing the walls in former presidents, chancellors and board chairs. He acknowledged he'll join them up there one day.

When he does, he'll be only the second chair in history without current London roots. Michele Noble, chair from 2007-09, lived in Toronto during her tenure. It's a distinction Coxford feels gives him a unique perspective on the institution.

He admits to seeing a far different institution than the one he left 30-plus years ago. Chiefly, he remains impressed with the university's ever-improving quality of students. "This university is at the very front ranks – I mean the very front ranks – of Canadian universities in terms of the quality of students enrolling. That's a huge change," he said.

He also recognizes the challenges facing those students, said a man who paid \$700 per year to attend law school.

He's bullish on the university's future despite the economic and political challenges facing higher education. He said President Amit Chakma has the right team – new, young and energetic – in place for the right time in the institution's history. And he thinks the engagement of all, especially among alumni, plays a huge part in the Western's future success.

On that last point, Coxford knows what he talks about perhaps more than anyone.

"Look back, as I have," he said, "at what the institution did for you and think about giving other people the opportunity to enjoy and receive the same."