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The Centenary mystique: Quaint campus — and emphasis on well-being — is school's 1st selling point

By Tom Bergeron



Dale Caldwell at Centenary University.

From the friendly neighborhood of Hackettstown to the Victorian-style building that anchors the campus to the hills that surround the campus in rural Warren County, Centenary University certainly has a quaint feel to it — a blast from the past, for sure.

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"It really is different here," new President Dale Caldwell said. "There definitely is a Centenary mystique."

Simply put, it is welcoming — one that literally is a safe space.

This mystique has helped draw more than 1,300 students to the campus.

"Parents who are looking for a safe place for their kids — physically and emotionally — find it here," he said. "We feel the Centenary mystique — the idea of emotional well-being, intellectual curiosity and intercultural competence — will resonate with parents and resonate with students."

Caldwell said he understands how having emotional well-being is the first building block of success for students. He's seen it throughout an impressive career that has intersected with education at all levels.

"Years ago, I was the head of a charter school in Trenton and, when I was there, many of the students were economically challenged and had what seemed like post-traumatic stress disorder," he said. "So, I created Urban Traumatic Stress Disorder.

"When you come from urban communities, you can be brilliant, but your amygdala is challenged because you've dealt with so many things. So many of the students that are coming here are coming from economically challenged communities.

"So, what we've done is really emphasize things like mindfulness and other social, emotional support systems. Part of our mystique is this emotional well-being."

It starts at the application process, Caldwell said.

"One of the other things that Centenary does and always has done — this didn't start with me — is identify students that may have some challenges when they look at applications," he said. "Then, when we get them, we make sure we support them with a Campus Life program.

"It's everyone. If I see a student eating by himself, I'll go and sit down with them and ask them, 'How's it going?' And make sure they feel like this is a place where they can fit in."

About a third of the school's overall enrollment (approximately 450 of 1,300) live in dorms, including approximately half of the freshman class. Many others live in the nearby community.

And, by community, Centenary means the Skylands region, where it draws the majority of its students. In fact, Centenary was the first university in the state to start a program where those attending a local community college (it draws from Sussex and Warren county colleges) can live on campus. Approximately 100 from Sussex County College do so this year.

Moving forward, Caldwell said he'd like to get Centenary's enrollment up to 2,000.

Jersey first

New Centenary University President Dale Caldwell is confident many students will select Centenary — but not all of them. And he's OK with that.

Caldwell feels the state's universities need to work together in a way where students will see all the possibilities and select which one is right for them.

"We need to get more New Jersey students to stay in New Jersey," he said. "They need to see all of our schools — and we need to understand that we're not necessarily competing with each other.

"Not every school is great for every student. Seton Hall is very different than Centenary, which is very different than Montclair, which is very different than Rutgers. Each of those schools may have something unique for each student. That's why I don't understand why people are so concerned about collaborating."

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He feels the school has the opportunity to bring in more students from Central and South Jersey (where there are no private schools) or even start a satellite campus in that region (there is the beginning of an effort in the Atlantic City area). The opportunities to bring in international students exist, too.

Happiness lives here

Centenary University was in the news around the globe last fall when it offered the first Master of Arts in happiness studies.

The 30-credit online degree, taught by one of the world's leading experts, Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar of the Happiness Academy, is designed to prepare students to advance into supervisory and management positions in any career field.

New Centenary President Dale Caldwell is a huge proponent of the class — there's already talk of adding a doctorate of happiness.

"When you hear him speak, he lays out this idea of happiness in such a research-based way, that it's not a hokey thing," Caldwell said. "He believes that happiness comes from your ability to work with difficult things in life. And when he starts with that, it resonates."

Caldwell said the fact Ben-Shahar chose to launch his program through Centenary adds to the idea of the Centenary mystique.

"Do you know how many universities in the world have quoted him and wanted him to be with them," Caldwell asked and then answered. "He chose Centenary. And one of the reasons that he chose us was our mystique.

"He saw a place that really cares about the community and emotional well-being in a unique way. That drew him here."

Caldwell is determined to use the Centenary mystique to change the lives of the students. It starts with those who are on campus now. The ability to have that impact is at the heart of what the school is all about, Caldwell said.

"We're not Princeton — we're not looking for kids that are going to be successful no matter where they go," he said. "We're looking for good students who have grit.

"We really want to look at where people are from — and what they have overcome — and then support them when they are here."

It's all part of the Centenary mystique, Caldwell said.

"Our job as a university is to be a positive influence on young people," he said. "If you have enough positive influence, you can counter negative influences in people's lives.

"It's not where students start, it's where they end."

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