

Alfred University President Zupan speaks to Rotary Club of Corning

10/06/17



Alfred University President
Mark Zupan speaks to
member of the Corning Rotary

CORNING, NY Mark Zupan began his tenure as 14th president of Alfred University a little more than 15 months ago, and in that short time he has learned of a host of remarkable alumni whose lives were transformed by their time at Alfred.

On Thursday, Zupan shared the stories of some of those alumni at a presentation to the Rotary Club of Corning. “I’ve been on the job since July 2016, and there have been some memorable moments along the way,” he said to the group of Rotarians meeting at the Radisson Hotel.

Alfred University has a long tradition of inclusivity and diversity (it is the first school to both admit women and allow them the opportunity to pursue the same course of studies as men). The University prides itself on giving students the opportunity to identify their passions and then develop the confidence to pursue those passions; and for providing a community in which individuals develop character and resilience.

Zupan spoke of a trio of former students Warren Sutton, Kristin Beck, and Julio Fuentes all of whom have shown strength and character in overcoming adversity.

Sutton, former basketball star for the Saxons in the late 1950s and an African American, left school in the wake of pressure put on him for dating the white daughter of a University administrator. Zupan reached out to Sutton last year and a healing process began

“You may have expected a bitter reply, or none,” Zupan said. “But actually the response he gave brings a tear to your eye. He’d forgiven us and moved on.”

Sutton returned to campus in May to address students at commencement and was presented with an honorary degree. “To be able to have him come back was very moving,” Zupan said.

Kristin Beck was Chris Beck while a student at Alfred University, graduating in 1989. Beck went on to become a U.S. Navy Seal, serving with distinction in the Mideast and then advising the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Her transgender transformation is the subject of a book, “Warrior Princess,” and a documentary film “Lady Valor.” Last fall, Beck, along with Fuentes and Don McPherson & 84 MS, 88 PhD, were recipients of the University’s inaugural Fiat Lux! Awards.

Fuentes was a star tailback on the Saxon football team who suffered a devastating neck injury during the opening game

of his sophomore season of 2006. Paralyzed from the neck down and told by doctors he would never walk again, Fuentes spent years in rehabilitation, vowing that someday he would prove the doctors wrong. During the opening game of the 2016 season, a decade after his injury, Fuentes served as honorary captain for the opening coin toss and walked off Merrill Field at Yunevich Stadium under his own power.

Zupan said that University trustees voted unanimously to give Fuentes a full scholarship to complete his studies. “His goal is to earn a degree in counseling psychology so he can help people as he was helped,” Zupan said.

Generations of Alfred University students have gone on to accomplish great things. Among those Zupan talked about Thursday were: Don McPherson ’84, ’88; Enid Borden ’72; Chris Heckle ’92; and Shaminda Amarakoon ’04.

McPherson, who earned a master’s and doctorate in glass science at Alfred University, invented corrective lenses that allow most color blind people to discern individual colors.

Borden, who developed a passion for social activism while an undergraduate, has a goal of “eradicating hunger, especially among senior citizens,” Zupan said. The former CEO of Meals on Wheels, Borden is the founder and CEO of the National Foundation to End Senior Hunger.

Heckle, whose parents and husband are also Alfred University alumni, earned a bachelor’s degree in ceramic engineering from Alfred in 1992, a master’s in glass science in 1995 and a doctorate in 1998, also from Alfred. She is director of inorganic materials research at Corning Incorporated.

“During her keynote remarks at this year’s Convocation for new students at Alfred University, Heckle emphasized how someone at Alfred University will change your life,” Zupan said. “Her remarks paralleled what we consistently hear from our alumni.”

Amarakoon, whose father is Alfred University ceramic engineering professor emeritus Vasantha Amarakoon, graduated from Alfred University in 2004. He had begun his collegiate at Duke University as a biomedical engineering major, but he left before completing his studies, his heart not in engineering.

He enrolled at Alfred University and immersed himself in the performing arts, studying acting, directing, writing, and production design.

Amarakoon graduated from Alfred with a degree in theater and today is chair of the Technical Design and Production Department and Director of Production at the School of Drama and Yale Repertory Theater.

Zupan spoke of the spirit of generosity and giving back that is prevalent at Alfred University, as exemplified by Marlin Miller ’54, ’89 HD. A former chair of the University’s Board of Trustees, Miller graduated from Alfred University with a bachelor’s degree in ceramic engineering. He developed an appreciation for the arts while a student at Alfred and has gone on to become the University’s greatest benefactor.

His gifts have funded the construction of three buildings dedicated to the arts: Miller Performing Arts Center (opened in 1995), Miller Theater (opened in 2010), and the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum (opened last year). He also has funded three endowed faculty/staff positions, supported the dance program at Alfred University, endowed significant scholarships, and been a leader of the University’s Strategic Investment Fund. “Marlin’s first philanthropic investment involved \$200 for the Alfred Fund. When reviewing all the support that he has provided the University since then, Marlin noted that he feels that each gift, no matter the size, has been meaningful to him and that he has been privileged to be able to invest in our University’s future,” Zupan said.