



TRANSITIONS

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY DUANE ZEHR

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Goodbye, Mister Roberts

After five years at his beloved alma mater, Bradley's 11th president and his wife want to tick some items off their bucket list.



Gary Roberts '70 originally planned to retire in 2015, but when his alma mater asked if he'd consider becoming its president, he loved the institution enough to delay that dream.

When he retired in May for the second time, Roberts left Bradley nearly 50 years to the day of his undergraduate commencement and with an even deeper affection for the university and its people.

While the new \$100 million-plus Business and Engineering Convergence Center may be the most visible sign of Roberts' legacy, equally important are the less visible things.

"I think we've brought a level of stability and trust between the faculty and the administration," he told the Peoria Journal Star last May. "... We've got in place an exceptional senior leadership team that I think can continue to implement the strategic plan and the blueprint and do the kinds of things that need to be done to transition Bradley to the new environment that higher ed is facing."

Those challenges include a declining high school population, economic disparities and rising costs in technology, health care and security.

"It's such a hyper-competitive environment now, because of the demographic issues, that we have to spend more on marketing and selling ourselves," Roberts said in early March. "We have to spend more on bells and whistles that certainly didn't exist when I was a student.

"So costs are going one way and the ability of a declining population to pay is going another way. And then there's the narrative out there that you really don't need a college education anymore, which I think is wrong, but it's nonetheless what a lot of young people are hearing."

As president, Roberts also brought a level of transparency to senior leadership. In addition to having an open, communicative style, he established "Ask the Administration," a link where employees can ask questions in

Thoughts on a Presidency

"When you're the president, a lot of people think you have more authority on issues than maybe you do. But if you're trying to make improvements, you're not going to make everyone happy. You've got to be sensitive but also a little bit tone deaf because at times it's a thankless job."

— GARY ANNA '75,
WHO RETIRED IN 2018 AS
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT FOR BUSINESS AFFAIRS

"Gary brought a sense of calm and care to Bradley. Having him and the provost be alumni, you can understand their concern for being great stewards of the university."

— MATT O'BRIEN,
INTERIM DEAN,
FOSTER COLLEGE OF BUSINESS

Thoughts on a Presidency

“I witnessed firsthand how committed Gary was to the principles of shared governance, and how he contributed to its enhancement, expanding the faculty’s role in the university’s decision-making process. These have increased trust, respect and partnership between faculty and staff and the leadership of the university.”

— AHMAD FAKHERI,
PROFESSOR OF MECHANICAL ENGINEERING
AND PRESIDENT, UNIVERSITY SENATE

“Gary is so, so real and so down to earth. I think that works for both of us because we’re just who we are. I just am in awe of him, of all the things he’s done, and how smart he is and how good hearted he is, and what a tough job he has. I try to do what I can to maybe make this job a little easier.”

— DONNA CARR ROBERTS,
GARY’S WIFE

“There’s no doubt Gary has kept me on my toes from a PR perspective, but he’s also given me the freedom to do my job without micromanagement. He always encouraged me to think differently and to try new things.”

— RENEE CHARLES,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
AND UNIVERSITY SPOKESPERSON

order to prevent rumors from spreading. Roberts believes being a good communicator is an important part of his job.

“I think when I arrived, the level of distrust and dysfunction between the administration and the faculty was at a very high level,” he said. “And I think we’ve bridged that gap ... I think different units within the university are now doing very well at accomplishing their goals and their missions, because we’ve got a good leadership team and we’ve got good people in place.”

Being able to get support from disparate constituencies is another key element. Roberts said he believes some things have gone very well, but acknowledged there’s always unfinished business.

“They’re just so many different perspectives and so many different groups that you really do have to be able to work with people I think pretty well,” said Roberts. “And you do have to have the humility to know that you don’t really know the answer to everything, but the confidence to know that you have to answer some things, and just stick with them and go forward.”

How does he handle the stress? Like most people who work in high-pressure situations, Roberts called it “a mixed bag,” admitting there are times he gets irritated or frustrated. He added he tries to live by the adage, “Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Yet when it comes to accomplishments, in addition to the new Business and Engineering Convergence Complex, he’s most proud of putting together what he called “a really first-class leadership team” that makes up the Administrative Council.

“I think all of them are very good at what they do,” he said. “All of them are good people who have the interests of the institution at heart. They work hard; they are good collaborators. Having a quality leadership team is so important.”

Both Roberts and his wife, Donna Carr Roberts, made it a point to be involved in the community and both are passionate animal people. She wrote her book, “The Adventures of Mr. Fuzzy Ears: Searching for a Furry Friend,” partly to be a fundraiser for the Peoria Humane Society, where Carr Roberts also serves on the board.

Additionally, Carr Roberts has worked with the Peoria Symphony, including on a project that led to the creation of an exhibit from Bradley’s art collection to accompany a performance of Mussorgsky’s “Pictures at an Exhibition.”

More recently, the Bradley artist-in-residence painted a portrait of Maestro George Stelluto for his 10th anniversary.

Carr Roberts doesn’t think of herself as a typical first lady. Like her husband, she’s grown to love being part of the Bradley family.

“We just really love the campus atmosphere,” she said. “I didn’t know that much about Bradley before we came here, and I’m just really impressed with the people we have and everybody I’ve worked with.”

“Donna’s just a sweetheart,” Roberts said in return. “I mean, she, no matter what we would do or where we would move, she would fit in and enjoy it. Because she just enjoys people and she enjoys doing what she does. And so, she’s really dived in to engaging with people at the university.”

In the future, the couple is excited about having more opportunities to do things they love, like travel. Roberts is considering getting back into his specialty, sports law, and possibly going back into practice in Indianapolis, which will be their home base. When asked what he’ll miss most about Bradley and Peoria, Roberts had a ready answer.

“All the people,” he said. “I mean, we’ve made a lot of friends here. There’s no doubt that what I’ll miss are the people.” **B**