

Southwestern Christian College

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A Q&A with the President of Southwestern Christian College

Meet Dr. Ervin D. Seamster, Jr.

Throughout 2017, Dr. E. D. Seamster, Jr. granted mini-interviews to Dallas author and columnist Joyce King. Some of her questions, and his answers, are shared in this 'Q&A with the President.'

JFK: Dr. Seamster, you were appointed President in January 2017, and you hit the ground running with a challenging, difficult set of circumstances. In the midst of budget cuts and furloughs, reassignments and recruiting, what was the biggest obstacle you had to overcome?

EDS: Not one obstacle, but *a slew of obstacles*. But I'd have to say the most stubborn one has been erasing the mindset that because we've made a good deal of progress, in such a short period of time, that Southwestern is out of the woods. WE ARE NOT. We are not where I know we need to be in order to achieve the goal of firm financial footing and a solid foundation to build on. We have a long way to go, and I want people to understand this formidable challenge is not a sprint. It is...a long-distance race.

JFK: You promised students, parents, faculty, donors and supporters, "greater transparency." Do you feel you have delivered on that promise?

EDS: Very much so, because every step of the way, we've provided progress reports, online updates at the website, and communicated with students by holding town halls and other events. We have embraced our parents so they feel more like partners, sharing information with them that they didn't have before. At the annual board meeting, I provided a detailed overview of my vision for the future, as well as the projects that have been completed. I also believe in using social media for an added level of transparency. The information is out there.

JFK: The summer of 2017 may very well go down in Southwestern history as the non-stop labor of love. Can you describe what that was like?

EDS: Well, it was hot, and pretty intense. We were up against a deadline to complete an ambitious list of expensive, time-consuming projects. These were items that had been long-neglected, a list of things that not many people were rushing to tackle. Honestly, we did not have the funds in our budget, but I came up with an unorthodox plan that included the use of my company's contractors and laborers, pulling them away from other jobs. I...

JFK: Wait, *your company* provided the labor, the materials, the money, and the man-hours, for which projects?

EDS: For a wide-range of projects, but we also had to raise funds to help cover the cost of several items, including repairs to rooftops, new bathrooms for the Girl's Dorm, a new monument, painting, landscaping, removing trailers and debris, new AC units, installing lighting—both indoor and outdoor, new security cameras and new furniture, and a complete renovation for our tennis courts. A more comprehensive list of upgrades and improvements can be viewed at the website. I'm very proud of everyone who worked over the summer because we put in some long hours to have major projects finished *before* the fall semester, and before the students returned in late summer.

JFK: In addition to these improvements and upgrades, what are you doing to enhance Southwestern *academically*?

EDS: We've made some key personnel changes that have instantly strengthened our outreach and inspired higher standards. We now have a more ambitious recruiting strategy. This year's incoming class had the highest overall GPA of any in the past decade. We're consulting with PhD candidates who are mentoring and encouraging new students, candidates that we hope will join us as fulltime staffers in the future, most notably, Vernesha Cathey, Stanley Talbert, and Kecia Baker. We are also working on major business partnerships with city, county, and state leaders, as well as new alliances with universities and potential employers. We are always encouraging students to apply for the President's Scholarship, as we work to help them identify grants, fellowships, and internships across the country.

JFK: What has surprised you the most about your presidency?

EDS: That a former basketball player from Southwestern—who graduated in 1987—could be President of the same school that supplied me the spiritual formation that set me on my academic trajectory, that gave me the confidence to know I could learn and accelerate *academically*. Southwestern was my sanctuary, a place that nurtured and groomed me, providing the space and freedom to grow into the kind of man that God could easily guide. I used to refer to myself as 'God's Nobody' because I have a healthy sense of humor, but also because if he can take someone like me and mold them,

God can do that for any young person who wants to be part of the Southwestern family. I am delighted, *surprised*, and extremely proud that I was chosen to lead and give something back to this glorious, historic institution of higher learning. This is a gift I could have never anticipated.

JFK: Do you think your humble academic beginnings at Southwestern provided you special insight into what students need, or, what they are dealing with?

EDS: Yes, I have some idea of who these young people are. I have walked the ground they are walking on, prayed to the God they are praying to, struggled with some of the very issues they are facing, like having the right clothes to fit in, socializing and being a part of extracurricular activities while juggling studies and staying in touch with parents. I played basketball, so I know what life is like for our student-athletes. I studied to become a minister, so I know how difficult the requirements are to be prepared to excel once you enter a school like SMU, which is where I graduated after rigorous studies at Perkins School of Theology. I also know we have young men and women who come from all socioeconomic walks of life. That is why some of the criteria for coming to work here is that you love our students, protect our students, and put them first. I will always be an advocate for them and welcome their voices.

JFK: What position did you play?

EDS: I played shooting guard.

JFK: Do you still like basketball?

EDS: Yes, I'm going to get in a lot of trouble for this... but LeBron James is my favorite player. (He laughs.) Not just for his performance and prowess on the court, but for what he does off the court, including his decision to provide millions in academic scholarships for disadvantaged youth.

JFK: Switching gears for a moment, what are you hearing from students today? What is their biggest fear, their greatest need?

EDS: Here at Southwestern, we are hearing that students who never thought of us are glad they gave us a second look because they are seeing a new level of care and concern for them. They feel safe here. Their biggest fear is they might have ended up somewhere they would be ridiculed for their pride of culture and identity. Their biggest need remains what I call the "Jesus-Ethic" that would support them in all things because love is the most powerful force in the world. We must not only love them, but show them *how to love themselves* and demonstrate this love consistently. They need patience, instruction, along with a tender-but-tough-love mentality to

prepare them for a world that is not going to coddle them or always be kind to them. These students need to be able to answer the kind of prevalent questions once framed by the great W. E. B. Dubois. Which include asking themselves how integrity should face oppression and what would honesty do when it must take on deception? I love his question, “What shall virtue do to meet brute force?” When students can answer life’s stirring questions, they will have less fear, more freedom. This knowledge will give them the courage to form a network of support for one another. I understand these students do not want their school to close. I’ve promised them that it will not happen under my watch, not as long as I have the strength, breath, and grace, to carry on.

JFK: What do you need, right now, today?

EDS: Just ahead of the 2017 Lectureship, I personally began seeking 1,000 donors—that can be alumni or supporters—to each give \$1,000 before February 15th to help us wipe out a \$1 Million Dollar debt that has hung over Southwestern for years now. Even with all the projects we’ve completed and the upgrades we’ve made to the campus, there remains a belief that everything is alright and the school is fine now. Do not let the new furniture, beautifully-renovated courts or extra security cameras lull you into a false sense of completion. I have to stress this as emphatically as I can: WE ARE NOT OUT OF THE WOODS. Our beloved school remains under a state of emergency and my goal, before, February 15th, is to raise an Angel Fund of \$1 Million Dollars, as a one-time campaign, with benefits we expressly use to eliminate this stubborn debt. This gives our students even more hope. It also sends a message that we value our accreditation and good rating. Once we pay that off, we will almost have a clean slate going into 2018.

JFK: In the spirit of founder, G. P. Bowser, what principles do you carry with you as we celebrate him and the rich heritage at Southwestern?

EDS: We are of a similar mindset when it comes to outreach, education and young people. G. P. Bowser fought for students to have everything they needed to succeed, so they might fully understand their value and potential. I love that he adored talented students and did not want them going through back doors or sitting at the back of the bus. He cherished them so much he pushed harder for equality, a greater independence, so they could enjoy more educational opportunities and enter...*through the front door*. I feel such a connection to G. P. Bowser and the ideals that inspired him to believe he could start a school and leave a legacy. He was ahead of his time, a forward thinker and humanitarian who believed in giving back.

JFK: What others have provided you sustenance, while at Southwestern, as a student, and now, as its President?

EDS: I would be remiss if I did not mention the creative women in my life, both personally and professionally, women who have made a profound impact with their love, support, grace and care. Beginning with my mother, Iona Seamster, I was blessed to have this strong, amazing, generous woman who wanted the world for me. She told me all the time how smart I was. Even when I didn't feel it, my mother emphasized, over and over, that I could reach my goals with hard work. As much as I appreciate my father and all the strong men in my life, I was surrounded by a bevy of beautiful sisters. They kept track of me. They poured love into me. I had four sisters who helped raise me. Where would we be without our sisters? The same is true for Southwestern. Look at our rich heritage, our unique history. Women have not always received the credit they deserved, but they were there every step of the way. Sometimes, we could see them—teaching and fundraising. Often times, women have been behind the scenes, cooking, preparing, cleaning, and praying so hard for us to come through the storm. Women have played an integral role in making sure Southwestern Christian College prepared its children for the future.

JFK: Dr. Seamster, thank you for your time today.

EDS: It's always an honor to talk about Southwestern, to travel around the country and meet others who passed through Terrell, Texas. We love our alumni and all of our faithful supporters.

JFK: Can I get a follow-up interview?

EDS: It's a long line, (laughing heartily) but I'll see what we can do.