

LOCAL

Woodrow Wilson retires. Well, at least the man who played him, as impersonator steps down.



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STAUNTON — Pulling out the chair and taking a seat at a conference table inside the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum recently, Judd Bankert noted that it was most appropriate that, hanging on the wall overlooking the table, was a portrait of Dolores Lescure.

It was all because of her, after all, that Bankert was even sitting at the table on that day.

Lescure, who died in 2006, a former Staunton mayor, journalist and educator, was the longtime president of the board of trustees at the presidential library.

Bankert had arrived in Staunton around 1999 and, maybe a year later, and had gotten involved with the Staunton Downtown Development Association, where he met Lescure. She invited him to a reception at library. While he was there, someone came up to him and said, "Has anyone ever told you that you look like Woodrow Wilson?"

That started a run of more than 20 years where Bankert portrayed the former president for the library, not only locally at parades and library events, but throughout the country at various events. Bankert recently announced he was retiring. His last public event was Staunton's Veterans Day parade in November, but his official retirement was Feb. 3, the centennial of Wilson's death.

"I've been a kindergarten teacher and social studies teacher in seventh grade," Bankert said. "I was a bit of a ham, so I was flattered to have the opportunity to dress up and ride around."

Bankert grew up in Michigan and remembers being intrigued by the historic interpreters on trips to Fort Mackinac with his family. He was also fascinated by the interpreters he saw on a

trip to Historic Williamsburg when he was young. That stuck with him into adulthood.

"The idea of dressing up and pretending to be somebody was kind of appealing," he said.

Bankert was certainly familiar with Wilson when he got the role, but once he began portraying him, Bankert began studying Wilson in-depth. He said he could never have portrayed someone whom he didn't respect.

Bankert is clear that he isn't in agreement with everything for which Wilson stood, most notably Wilson's segregationist beliefs and his defense of the Confederacy. As president, Wilson worked to segregate several federal government agencies. Even Princeton, where Wilson served as president, removed his name from its School of Public and International Affairs.

Wilson's legacy is certainly controversial, something that the Presidential Library in Staunton doesn't hide from, but Bankert said many of the former president's writings contain powerful messages that are useful to look at in today's political climate.

"Remember, this is the period where we had the same kind of extraordinary distortion of wealth distribution in this country that we have now," Bankert said. "And Wilson wrote about a number of the pains that caused. The more I read, the more I was enthralled with the character. And it had a profound impact on the way I looked at the world and and the way I look at political discourse."

Bankert shared one of his favorite Wilson quotes, one he said was most relevant to today's politics.

My urgent advice to you would be, not only always to think first of America, but always, also, to think first of humanity. You do not love humanity if you seek to divide humanity into jealous camps. Humanity can be welded together only by love, by sympathy, by justice, not by jealousy and hatred. I am sorry for the man who seeks to make personal capital out of the passions of his fellow-men. He has lost the touch and ideal of America, for America was created to unite mankind by those passions which lift and not by the passions which separate and debase. We came to America, either ourselves or in the persons of our ancestors, to better the ideals of men, to make them see finer things than they had seen before, to get rid of the things that divide and to make sure of the things that unite. It was but an historical accident no doubt that this great country was called the "United States"; yet I am very thankful that it has that word "United" in its title, and the man who seeks to

divide man from man, group from group, interest from interest in this great Union is striking at its very heart."

Woodrow Wilson, address to naturalized citizens at the Convention Hall, Philadelphia (May 10, 1915)

"These tactics of divide and anger, and making personal capital out of the passions of your fellow man is the oldest trick in the book," Bankert said. "And Wilson saw it 100 years ago. How can we not see it now?"

Andrew Phillips is the curator and director of museum operations for the presidential library. He said it would have been easy for Bankert to accept the role of Wilson and simply wear the costume and wave at people from the Pierce-Arrow limousine.

Phillips then looked at Bankert.

"But the amount of research and reading that you did to bring that to life in such a real way is one of several reasons why you were so good at it for all those years," Phillips said.

Included in Bankert's collections are the 69 volumes of the Papers of Woodrow Wilson. Phillips said Bankert is possibly the only private citizen to have that complete set.

During his time portraying Wilson, Bankert had the opportunity to travel outside of Staunton in the role. He spoke at the New Jersey State House. He spoke at events in Maryland and Colorado. He traveled to Romania.

He even had a small part portraying Wilson in "The World Wars," a 2014 three-part miniseries on the History Channel. It was only three or four scenes, shot in West Virginia, but Bankert called the experience "fascinating." It did land him an IMDb page, complete with bio.

When he took the role of Wilson, Bankert said he'd retire on the centennial of Wilson's death. Maybe it was partly in jest, but he realized he would be almost 75 at that point and it seemed like a good time to step aside.

"All things good things come to an end," he said. "And it really was a few months before (the Veterans Day parade) that it kind of dawned on me that I had made that kind of mental commitment to myself. And I just looked at it and it just made perfect sense."

Now, The Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and Museum is in search of the next person to play Wilson. Anyone who looks like Wilson and is interested in taking rides in the Pierce-

Arrow limousine, Phillips would be happy to talk with them.

Bankert also offered to coach anyone in the role, which really only requires appearances in the Fourth of July and Veterans Day parades, possibly some fundraising events also. Phillips said it's not a steep learning curve and they'd be happy to start slow and go from there.

"We're looking for our next Woodrow Wilson," Phillips said. "Knowing that we can never replace the one we just lost."

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— *Patrick Hite is The News Leader's education reporter. Story ideas and tips always welcome. Contact Patrick (he/him/his) at phite@newsleader.com and follow him on Twitter @Patrick_Hite. Subscribe to us at newsleader.com.*