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INSIDE

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Wagner's decade of transformation

Former president's new book reveals how he lifted the college to top tier

By TRACEY PORPORA
SPECIAL TO THE ADVANCE

More than 5,500 miles away from the office he once occupied on Grymes Hill, Dr. Norman Smith is celebrating the release of his book about transforming Wagner College into the successful institution of higher learning it is today.

"Wagner is home for me. It's the place in my heart for which I feel the most affection and nostalgia," Smith said in a recent phone interview from his new office in Cairo, Egypt. "No other place has ever had that kind of effect on me or ever will."

While he's busy designing Alamein, an American-modeled university on the Egyptian Mediterranean, Smith, 63, still holds dear the 15 years he spent as president of Wagner College.

"I have never been anywhere else in my career for the length of time I was at Wagner," said Smith. "My daughter spent the first 10 years of her life at Wagner, and that is where I made a lot of friends on the faculty and staff. It's not just about what was accomplished; it's about the way you look back on family."

INSIDER'S VIEW

Smith's new book, "From Bottom to Top Tier in a Decade," published by iUniverse, gives readers an insider's view of how he took the helm at Wagner in 1988 when the institution was failing academically and structurally, and in 10 years transformed it into a highly-recognized educational institution.

"When I first arrived, the state Department of Education was about to close down the school. I said to myself, 'It should be one of the more successful colleges in the Northeastern United States,'" Smith said.

"I become passionate about preventing Wagner from closing. I said to myself, 'This place should be rich and famous. It's sitting on top of a hill overlooking Manhattan. If any school should be a big success, it should be this one.'"

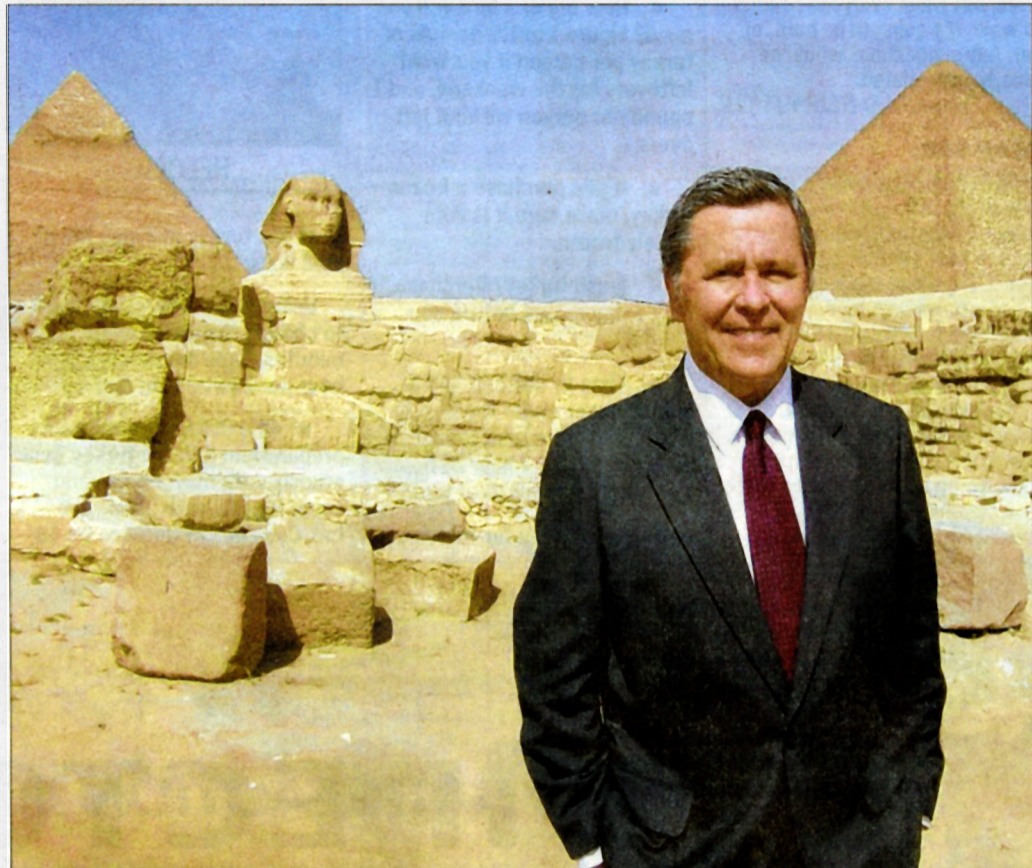
DECADE OF GROWTH

In the book, Smith explains how the 130-year-old college rose from bottom to top tier in a decade.

"The national ranking of the school in publications, such as US News & World Report, Barron's and Princeton Review, was at the bottom of the bottom tier," recalls Smith. "But 10 years later, it had evolved to top tier. I don't think there is one other college in America that moved from the bottom tier to the top tier ranking in only 10 years."

Smith elaborates about the steps that led to Wagner's revitalization.

"As the book recounts, my first steps were to do everything possible to make the campus more presentable. We washed off all the graffiti, picked up all the litter, mowed all the lawns, trimmed all the bushes and painted everything that hadn't been touched in years," he said. In addition, college officials stopped admitting students who were unprepared for college.



Dr. Norman Smith, former president of Wagner College, in front of the Sphinx and the Great Pyramids of Giza in Egypt. Smith's new book, "From Bottom to Top Tier in a Decade," above right.

"By changing admissions standards, Wagner College became a more competitive school, and its reputation elevated as a result," he said, recalling his strategy.

AMBITIOUS CAMPAIGN

In "From Bottom to Top Tier," Smith recounts the most ambitious fund-raising campaign in Wagner's history that consisted of "tens of millions" donated by alumni, including Don Spiro, a 1949 alumnus, who became chairman of the Board of Trustees, and Peggy Reynolds, a 1941 graduate. Large donations contributed to the campus beautification program, a new computer center and many other onsite amenities.

"I'm getting a lot of good feelings knowing that those who contributed to Wagner College during that time won't be forgotten," Smith said, referring to the book. "The story will always be there for people who want to know something about the history of Wagner College. This was one of the most key times in the history of the college. If the donors didn't do the things they did, there wouldn't be a Wagner College."

He noted that the result of these improvements increased enrollment from under 1,200 students in 1988 to more than 2,200 students in 2002.

Smith showcases Staten Island Advance news clippings and many photographs throughout the book to help chronicle Wagner's renaissance.

"The news stories and pictures were essential, in my view, in validating the story," he said. "Frankly, the turnaround was so significant and in so short a period of time that my story would be hard to believe had I not been able to corroborate with media accounts that were published at the time of each breakthrough."

Since leaving Wagner in 2002, Smith has continued to pursue a career-long passion for higher education, first in London and now in Cairo.

HAS SEEN THE WORLD

"Moving on to become part of the American international higher education com-

diversity.

"The university focuses on globalization, world awareness, international relations and cultural diversity," he said.

Smith's current role is founding chancellor and chief executive of an English-speaking international university under construction on the Egyptian Mediterranean. The project, to unfold over the next 10 years, includes plans for 12 colleges offering bachelor's, master's and doctoral degrees.

FROM THE GROUND UP

"The university Board of Trustees came to me with a proverbial offer I couldn't refuse: The opportunity to build a major university from the ground up," said Smith, referring to Alamein University.

"The university is conceived to be English-speaking and American in academic content and accreditation."

Smith was chosen to head up the project based on his familiarity with international American higher education.

"How often does anyone get to build a university from scratch? This was too attractive an opportunity to pass up," he said.

Smith feels he can help make a great difference in the educational standards in Egypt.

"Most Egyptians are not

well educated. There remains a chasm between the 'haves' and the 'have nots,' and the latter are the larger population," he said.

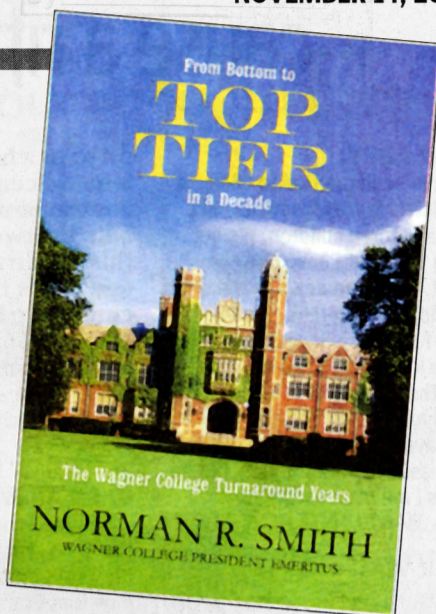
"Those families who can afford to educate their children make it their top priority. As a result, private international schools and universities flourish in Egypt and new ones are popping up annually, immediately becoming full to capacity."

"Alamein University will be an American international university and, like London, will seek to draw students from all over the world."

Smith is married to his wife of nearly 30 years, Dr. Susan Robinson, former president of Snug Harbor Cultural Center.

They have one daughter, Caroline, a freshman at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Tracey Porpora is a freelance writer from Staten Island.



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