



Lehigh University News Center

Posted on Monday, March 21, 2011

-- Kurt Pfitzer

A former president pens a "love letter to my country"

When he served as Lehigh's president from 1982 to 1997, Peter Likins was not reluctant to talk about the six children that he and his wife, Pat, had adopted.

In emails to faculty, students and staff, in interviews and casual conversations, and in the *Lehigh Alumni Bulletin*, Likins spoke of the joy of welcoming a new child, of coaching his kids' athletic teams and of taking cross-country road trips.

And he discussed the heartaches of dealing with teenage rebellion, drug and alcohol addiction, and mental illness.

Last week, Likins returned to campus to talk again about his family and to sign copies of his new book, *A New American Family: A Love Story*. The book was [published this year](#) by the University of Arizona Press. Likins was UA president from 1997 until 2006.

In his talk, Likins recalled growing up in a "two-room shack" in northern California. He had little contact with his father, who left the family, but he said his was a happy childhood.

"Our story is the American story"

At the age of 13, he met Pat at his junior high school graduation dance.

"I fell in love," he said. "I asked a girl I'd never seen before to dance. That night, she wrote in her diary that she had met the boy she was going to marry."

The couple married six years later. When Likins was 25, they adopted their first child, Lora.

"We saw Lora when she was eight hours old and brought her home three days later. We desperately wanted that baby."

Several days later, doctors told the Likinses that Lora had a hole in her heart and would probably not survive.

"I literally slumped to the ground," he said. "My wife took charge; she was always the strong one. Lora ended up running track in high school, and today she's a healthy, 48-year-old woman."

The Likinses adopted five more children—Paul, Krista, John, Teresa and Linda. Two of their children are mixed-race and two are Native Americans.

“I want America to be all it can be”

Likins said he and his wife have experienced many of the struggles now common among American families. Several of his children battled drug and alcohol abuse, several acted out while trying to find their purpose in life, and two became single parents.

John Likins’ story was the most tragic. In 2002, after 16 years of on-and-off drug use and rehabilitation efforts, John died of an overdose at 33. Like his father, he had been a championship wrestler.

Doctors diagnosed John with schizophrenia at the age of 21, four years after he had begun using illegal drugs, Likins said. Had the diagnosis come sooner, he suggested, John’s outcome might have been different.

“John was not an angry, rebellious kid. He was an extraordinary young man with two diseases. Our adventure with him was a beautiful experience. We have no regrets. We had more joy and more sorrow with him than with any of our other kids. That’s life.

“Dealing with drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness is not just our story, it’s the American story. We need to talk about these things and understand them.

“I want America to be all that it can be, so I wrote a love letter to my country.”