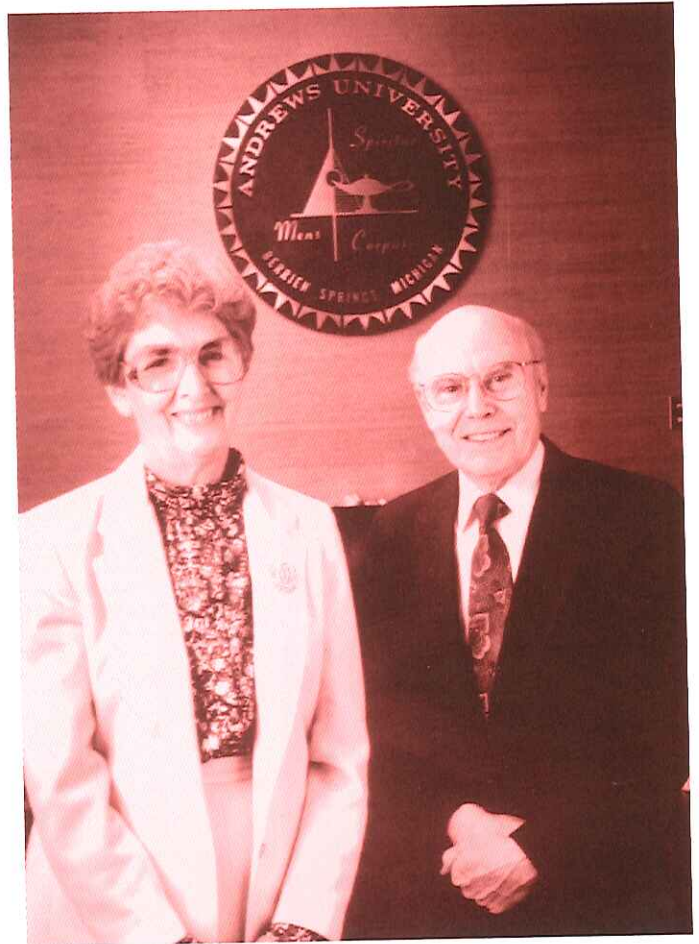


AT THE END OF A DECADE

Interview with **Dr. Leshner**



Dr. W. Richard Leshner and his secretary, Ruth Merkel (BA '89), have worked together since 1987.

Photo by David Sherwin

BY KAREN SPRUILL ▼

W RICHARD Leshner became the president of Andrews University in 1984. Previously he was a general vice president of the General Conference of SDAs, director of the Biblical Research Institute and associate director of the

Sabbath School Department of the General Conference in Washington, D.C. He worked for seven years at Atlantic Union College, eight years of mission service in the Middle East, and 10 years as a pastor in New England.

As Dr. Leshar prepares to retire, we want to commemorate his 48 years of service to the church with the following interview.

How did you get started working for the church?

I attended Atlantic Union College, and in my senior year the Northern New England Conference hired me. I was to serve as an intern in Rutland, Vermont, and help with an evangelistic series.

We left South Lancaster on September 8, 1946—Veda and I had been married in June. We went on a bus bound for Rutland. We had just a few belongings with us and had prearranged with the conference office to have money sent to the pastor for us. When we arrived in Rutland, the pastor was out of town and had left no message. We sent a telegram to the conference office and then stayed in a tourist home for a few days. I had about \$1 in my pocket. However, we got our problems settled and stayed in Rutland for six months.

I remember the first time that I preached in the evangelistic meetings. It was November and the topic was the signs of Christ's coming. The newspaper printed an article about a star shower that night which gave credence to the message.

Next we moved to Burlington, Vermont, where our children, Eileen and Martha, were born. Then we moved farther north to Morrisville, Vermont. We spent six years in Vermont and four years in Bangor, Maine. We made many good friends in Vermont and Maine, some of whom are still living and are our friends today.

In your past jobs, what parts prepared you for being president of Andrews?

From Bangor, Maine, we went to the Middle East. While living in Alexandria, Egypt, I was asked to be the principal at the Nile Union Academy near Cairo. That was my beginning in education. Then in 1962 while I was on furlough at the General Conference session, I was elected to be educational secretary of our division. So I made evaluative visits to the college and the dozen or so academies and grade schools in the Middle East Division.

After returning home, I decided to continue in educational work, so I finished my master's degree at Andrews in 1964. Then I went to teach religion at Atlantic Union College. While there I was also the director of summer school and assistant to the president. I completed work on a doctoral degree in religious education at New York University.

In the years just prior to coming to Andrews, I was director of the Biblical Research Institute. This work kept me in quite constant contact with professors throughout the North American Division. Also, my work as a vice president of the

General Conference was a very helpful preparation for the step to Andrews.

What have been some of the highlights of your 10 years as president?

The inauguration stands out—I'm convinced that a college or university president shouldn't start without an inauguration. It helps develop a bond between the new president, institution, and community.

It's always a highlight to add a new building, such as Chan Shun Hall, the School of Business, and to have the funding in hand. It was an accomplishment to get the School of Business out of the basement of Nethery Hall. And also to have the College of Technology move into Harrigan Hall.

Graduations are a highlight. I've always been interested in seeing students complete their studies and get started in their careers.

While I've been here the opening convocation was begun as an element of tradition. It adds a great deal to the opening of the school year. Students are able to see the seriousness of the program that they are starting. I think that ceremonies are important for an institution.

What surprised you about this job?

The first thing that surprised me was how easy it is to disturb the equilibrium on campus by administrative decisions. I wasn't prepared for the hair-trigger reactions that can be evoked over what I considered relatively inconsequential things. This was a real surprise. The previous 13 years I had been in a different environment at the General Conference.

The other surprise was the scattered nature of the faculty—there seemed to be a lack of cohesion. While I was at Atlantic Union College, it was a smaller school and the faculty seemed closer together.

And I was surprised by the great difficulty with which change takes place on campus. Having lived in New England, I thought that things grew more liberal as one went West!

What changes have you seen in Adventist higher education since you came to Andrews?

The biggest change is the trend toward athletics. When I came to Andrews, no SDA colleges were making a point of their athletics. Now a number of colleges are using it as a recruiting tool. I don't see this as a good move.

There is more openness in recruiting students. We've worked through the problem of recruiting by mail and telephone. At first we couldn't initiate contact with a student in writing—we could just respond if a student contacted us. This is a good change. Now Adventist students get materials from Seventh-day Adventist colleges and universities along with the mail they receive from state, other private, and community colleges.

One lack of change that surprises me is that no steps are being taken to control cost in higher education in the North American Division.

Finally, I've seen tremendous growth in the area of student aid. Today if we could retain enrollment and not hand out aid, we'd operate very well. We contribute about \$4 million per year in student aid, and enrollment is increasingly dependent on student aid.

You and your wife are frequently seen jogging around campus. What's your philosophy on staying fit and healthy?

There are two reasons for staying healthy. First, a Christian has a responsibility to take care of his/her body. The second element is to have a good quality of life.

I got into exercise after returning from the mission field. At that time the doctor said he could hear evidence of developing heart trouble. I did the indoor exercises that he recommended. Then Veda started walking and persuaded me to go along. Then I began to jog. Recently, I'm back to walking. It's a great benefit. I couldn't have stayed in this job here so long otherwise.

What influenced your decision to stay on in Berrien Springs after retiring this coming summer? And what hobbies or projects do you hope to enjoy?

Our two daughters and grandchildren are in this area—they are the biggest factors for now. We may choose to go away for winters. But our grand-

son is attending Andrews, our granddaughter will be here next year, and another grandson the following year. If our family should move then we may reconsider.

We moved into our house 10 years ago and haven't had time to do much to it. So the house needs attention—we need to catch up on the outside and inside, painting and refurbishing. I hope to get a computer and learn to use it and do some writing. And as an administrator I've had a hard time keeping up on reading and I like to read.

I would also like to go to Alaska. I have traveled to all 50 states except Alaska, Oklahoma and North Dakota. So I want to get to the last two, also.

If someone wanted to name a campus building or site after Richard Lesher, what item or place reflects you?

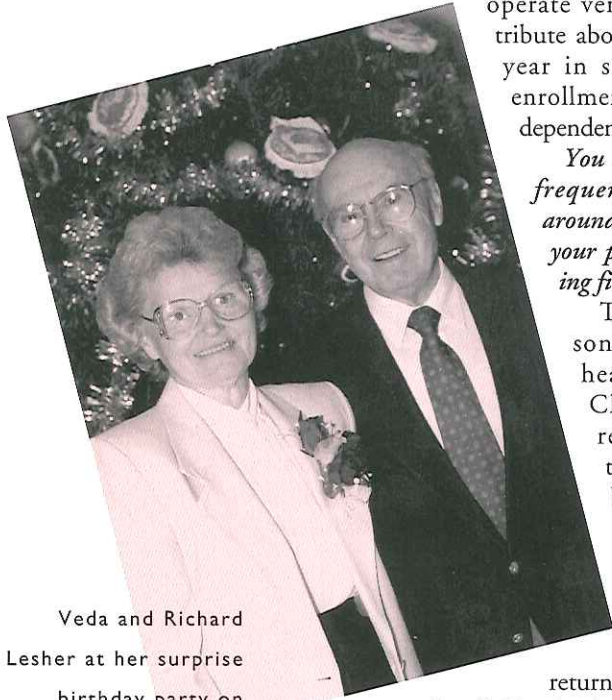
In relation to on-campus memorials, I don't believe that we have fulfilled our responsibility to Drs. Rittenhouse and Hammill and Mr. Garber. I certainly don't see myself deserving of the same consideration. But I have appreciated that we have preserved the Grove and the recreational opportunities there.

What are the biggest challenges that you see facing the next president of Andrews University?

The challenges and problems never end. They are part of the University's life and are continuous: spiritual nurturing of the campus, finances, enrollment, and hours of time just talking with faculty about their concerns.

Of course there are particular concerns that I believe will face the new president, such as support for implementation of the strategic plan, renovation of some buildings, and updating them to comply with accessibility regulations. I see a real need for implementing some kind of quality management approach throughout the institution. The stewardship of education suggests a high degree of accountability and care.

Karen Spruill is the editor of FOCUS.



Veda and Richard Lesher at her surprise birthday party on Dec. 1, 1993.

Photo by Jason Lim

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, VEDA

ON THE EVENING OF DEC. 1, 1993, FRIENDS AND FAMILY OF VEDA LESHER GATHERED IN THE WOLVERINE ROOM OF THE CAMPUS Center to celebrate her 70th birthday. Approximately 60 people greeted Veda with a "surprise" supper and short program. Personal highlights from each decade of Veda's life were presented and a Veda Lesher Endowed Scholarship Fund was announced.

During the past 10 years, Veda has been a gracious and hospitable hostess to students, board members, faculty and staff. She has been active in the community and in Pioneer Memorial Church where, with her husband she serves as an elder. In her latter role, she often visits women in the residence hall.

Three years ago, Veda helped organize and establish a new group of scholarships for women students under the name, Women's Advisory Scholarships. The committee, which she chairs, has been able to award five scholarships a year.

Several committee members wished to honor Veda on her birthday by establishing a woman's scholarship in her name. A total of \$7,500 is needed so that Veda can award the scholarship to a female graduate student during the annual Awards Assembly in May. Currently \$4,338 has been raised toward the goal.

For more information about Women's Advisory Scholarships or the Veda Lesher Scholarship, contact the Development Office at 616-471-3359.