One of several items worth celebrating on the morning of May 15, 2019, was that Fred Gruel, the retired president and CEO of AAA New Jersey Automobile Club, was honored with the receipt of the William Paterson University (WPU) President’s Medal. The disappointing news was that Mr. Gruel, a member of WPU’s Board of Trustees for nearly 27 years, delivered no acceptance speech. If he had done so, the 2,300 graduates and their friends and families at the WPU 2019 undergraduate commencement ceremony would have been treated to a memorable stand-up comic routine.

Searching “Humorous Speeches at Awards Celebrations” on YouTube, one will find a video of Mr. Gruel giving a laugh-out-loud commentary, when he accepted a different WPU award – the Legacy Award at the 19th Annual William Paterson University Foundation Legacy Award Gala in 2009. This video pops up just before the video of Will Ferrell’s 2017 USC Commencement speech.

Mr. Gruel, a member of the WPU Foundation for 20 years, talked about his many significant accomplishments that led to the award. For example, he set his hair on fire with a candle when he was an altar boy, after being distracted by a cute young lady in the third row of the pews; he learned from this experience that hair burns really quickly and emits a terrible odor. At his daughter’s wedding, he told the groom that there would be “no returns without a receipt.” And when he served in the U.S. Army in 1968, he took credit for the fact that there was not a single Russian invasion of the United States during his time as a soldier.

The reasons, however, for WPU honoring Mr. Gruel in 2009 and again at the WPU commencement in 2019 were far more serious and profound than Mr. Gruel himself ever would acknowledge. WPU’s President Richard Helldobler and Mr. Gruel’s fellow WPU Board colleagues at the 196th commencement ceremony had no problem articulating the reasons for honoring Fred Gruel, known for having one of the biggest hearts on WPU’s campus. President Helldobler presented Mr. Gruel the president’s medallion – the highest honor to be bestowed at William Paterson – “awarded to individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the University community, and who provide a positive role model through their outstanding service.”
A strong advocate for public higher education, Mr. Gruel and his wife Susan made a “generous” contribution to William Paterson to create an endowed scholarship supporting full time, first-generation college students who demonstrate academic excellence and financial need. More than 800 graduates, accounting for 42 percent of the William Paterson Class of 2019, were the first in their families to receive a college diploma.

The gift reflects Mr. Gruel’s passion for and commitment to the value of affordable, accessible, and quality education in today's society particularly for first-generation college students. “I did not graduate from WPU but am in total sync with its mission and the role it plays in its accessibility to and success of first-generation college students. I was the first in my family to graduate from college (Fordham University, BA, Florida State University (MBA)), and I truly understand the transformative effect of a college degree on one’s life,” he said.

He was asked to join the WPU board in 1992, after gaining the reputation in New Jersey as a prominent business leader who used his leadership pulpit to support and praise the core principles of public higher education.

After he received his bachelor's degree and served in the U.S. Army, the native New Yorker returned home to a job in the budget office at City University of New York. “This was the beginning of open admissions for City University, I had an opportunity to see first hand the importance of and need for a college education that was affordable and accessible to all no matter what the student’s financial situation and status in the community. I also saw how it changed lives as it changed mine. I was no exception – there were countless others like me. The dedication and passion exhibited by the faculty and staff really fueled the success of the students,” said Mr. Gruel.

He then went on to work for the Department of Higher Education under the leadership of Ralph Duncan and again “I saw the social significance of enabling students to further their education. Once I became part of the higher education community and understood the profound ramifications of higher education on society, the passion to work on behalf of public higher education never left me – even though professionally I went on to work in a leadership role at AAA. When I was nominated by Governor Florio to be on the WPU board, I was honored and very excited – to be able to continue working on behalf of public higher education in New Jersey,” he said.

Even though Mr. Gruel is no longer chair of the WPU board, he “is not going anyplace,” said Mr. Gruel who also is a member of the NJ Association of State Colleges and Universities.

“There are so many things I admire about WPU – its mission, great faculty and particularly its commitment to educating those first-in-the-family-to-go-to-college students. Whatever I can do to further the cause of WPU, I will do it,” he said. And that is no joke.

William Paterson University of New Jersey is a public institution that offers an outstanding and affordable education to a diverse traditional and nontraditional student body through
baccalaureate, graduate and continuing education programs. The university’s distinguished teachers, scholars and professionals actively challenge students to high levels of intellectual and professional accomplishment and personal growth in preparation for careers, advanced studies and productive citizenship. Faculty and staff use innovative approaches to research, learning and student support to expand students’ awareness of what they can accomplish. The university’s graduates embody a profound sense of responsibility to their communities, commitment to a sustainable environment and active involvement in a multicultural world.