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TOP STORY

Mission focused, WVU's President Gee heads into final academic year

by John G. Miller Executive Editor 5 hrs ago 3 min to read

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West Virginia University President Gordon Gee joined local business owners and community leaders at Rivertown Cafe to show off a new "Let's Go" flag during his 2024 summer tour July 31 in Marlinton. WVU photo by Matt Sunday

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Quick take:

n Dr. E. Gordon Gee, WVU President, remains active and focused on education and health care as he prepares for retirement in 2025.



West Virginia University President Gordon Gee, shown during his 2024 summer tour July 31 in Marlinton, says the university is in "a very strong position." WVU photo by Matt Sunday

HALF STEP A SPECTACULAR HEAD TRIBUTE SATURDAY AUGUST 17TH 2024 PALATINE PARK FAIRMONT WV

SAT, SEP 07 @ 7:30PM A TRIBUTE NIGHT TO THE EAGLES FEATURING OUT OF EDEN ROBINSON GRAND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

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n Despite his retirement plans, Gee continues to lead initiatives like the Education Collaborative and Ascend WV, impacting West Virginia's communities.

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n Gee plans to stay involved with WVU and West Virginia after retiring, cherishing his role in the university's annual activities and community engagement.

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That's the impression one has after a fast-paced 30-minute interview with West Virginia University President Dr. E. Gordon Gee, who keeps a schedule that belies his 80 years of age and 40-plus years as a major college president.

SUN, AUG 18 @ 7:00PM MOUNTAIN STAGE with Edley Melton PAUL THORN RAUL MIDON WOOD BOX HEROES EDEN BRINT JETT HOLDEN ROBINSON GRAND PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

Gee, who will retire July 1, 2025, isn't looking at this final year as president as a victory lap or swan song: He remains focused on the pillars of success he's worked to engrain not just at the university but throughout the state.

When The State Journal caught up with Gee, he had just finished up his annual summer tour through the Mountain State, continuing his effort to reach each of the state's 55 counties throughout the year.

"I'm excited about where the university is. I think we're in a very strong position; we've made the right decisions for the right reasons," Gee said as he prepares to welcome students back to campus for the fall semester on Aug. 15.

He noted the school's commitment not only to education at the higher levels, but also helping to strengthen public education on the K-12 level through efforts like the Education Collaborative, as well as programs set up with counties around the state.

Gee said the university must continue to be a driving force in public education, which has been another goal of his during his second stint as president.

"Finishing up my tour, (I've seen how) the university has made such a difference in the lives of so many people," Gee said. "I had a chance to visit Jackson General and the amazing work they are doing there. Just think: We now have a 25-hospital PREV health care system that is the envy of this country. [Consider] the fact that no West Virginian needs to leave the state to get great health care, no child needs to leave because we have a great Children's Hospital and we're building a new cancer center."

Gee has been a major visionary in the growth of WVU Medicine, starting during his first term as president back in 1981-85, when the system was first formed, and now as it has grown to be nationally recognized as one of the leading providers in a number of fields.

"I've always felt that health care was the missing component. It was the 'tent pole' for the future of West Virginia. And the reason is, when people aren't feeling well, when they're sick, when they don't have access to great health care, when they have a health care desert, everything else is not worth anything."

Both of those elements are mandatory for the university — and state — to reach another step on its mission: Expanding prosperity, not just on its own campuses and with its own students, but throughout the Mountain State.

"That's why I saw the state as our campus," Gee said. "Every corner of this state belongs to the university and this university belongs to every West Virginian."

That's why he's so passionate about the work of university programs like 4-H, the Extension Service and efforts with community building, land use programs and others geared to reaching West Virginians where they are, from the cities and towns to the most rural locations.

"And the final thing, I never want to leave our university without two things: Higher education and higher purpose," Gee said. "... To keep our young people here, you have to give them a sense of place and purpose and a sense of the fact that they can accomplish something in the state that they can't anywhere else."

In the effort to keep — and attract — more people to West Virginia, the university and Gee have been key factors in the Ascend WV program, which has shown great success.

"We now have five sites in West Virginia, and we have the most extraordinary retention rate," Gee said. "We're at 97%, which is better than Tulsa, [Oklahoma] better than Bentonville, Arkansas. So people not only are coming here (through the program), but they are staying."

With so many goals and projects, it's little wonder that the man who hails from Utah but proudly proclaims West Virginia home doesn't have much time to ponder retirement. But he knows it is time.

"... Every institution needs to refresh itself, and I need to refresh myself," Gee said. "I may be retiring from the presidency, but I'm certainly not from my commitment to West Virginia and West Virginia University."

"I'll continue to do important things, but I'll do it perhaps a little less structured."

Gee plans to give the new president, whoever it is, plenty of space to grow into the position, but he will remain active, either from Morgantown or the home he had built at The Greenbrier for his retirement.

But that is still in the distance for Gee, who needed to move on to the next meeting and the next step towards another "new" school year.

"You know, I always find the beginning of school as one of the two most exciting times in the history over the university. The second is commencement, because you see all the students and all those families."

"But seeing the families at the beginning, bringing their kids, unloading ... I'm trying to visit with as many as I can, giving out cookies and just welcoming them."

"It's a great time. It's a very energetic time for me that, as I move toward retirement, those two things, those aspects I really cherish and I'll miss."

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