

BridgeValley President Harris to retire

By: Steven Keenan for the Register-Herald

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MONTGOMERY — Dr. Jo Harris has spent countless hours at Davis Hall in Montgomery during her long teaching and administrative career.

This summer, that time will diminish dramatically.

Harris, president of the multi-campus BridgeValley Community and Technical College, announced recently her intention to retire this July.

“After much analysis and self-reflection, I have made the decision to retire as president of BridgeValley Community and Technical College effective July 5, 2016,” Harris said in a statement to the college’s Board of Governors during a meeting Jan. 29. “Having served in higher education for 41 years and as a college president for 12 years, it is the appropriate decision for me, my family and the college.”

“I’ve had a wonderful career, and we’ve accomplished great things,” Harris said last Monday. “It’s time to change leadership.”

There have been highlights, Harris said. For one, she expressed pride in the manner in which faculty and staff toiled together to accomplish the Legislature-spurred separation of the community college from the four-year baccalaureate institution at WVU Tech. That occurred in the 2002 to 2004 time frame.

And the consolidation effort of 2013-14 that merged Kanawha Valley CTC with then-Bridgemont CTC was “another huge undertaking that took a lot of work,” she said.

In both instances, a “dedicated faculty and staff” was integral in accomplishing the objectives.

Harris also said the opening of the 55,000-square-foot “state of the art” Advanced Technology Center of South Central West Virginia in South Charleston about 18 months ago was a big moment. “That has been a tremendous asset to all of our students,” she said, in addition to bolstering the college’s interaction with business and industry partners.

“Really, I don’t have any disappointments (about her tenure),” she said. “I feel very positive about the future.”

Harris is confident that future will include a BridgeValley presence in Montgomery, in light of the planned move of WVU Tech to Beckley.

“BridgeValley will continue to remain in Montgomery,” she said. “What you will see (with the Montgomery campus) is a greater emphasis on the transfer program.”

That means more efforts will be expended on having BridgeValley accept students for the first two years of their general education requirements before they transfer to four-year institutions.

Although she said she may consider some short-term work occasionally, Harris, a Glen Ferris resident, said she mostly wants to slow down a little. “I hope to retire and spend more time with my family.” She is the wife of former Fayette County Prosecuting Attorney Carl Harris.

A native of Carl in Nicholas County, Harris graduated from Richwood High School. She got her start as an instructor in the business education and office administration program in Montgomery as the community college component on the West Virginia Tech campus and elsewhere really began to take shape. She gradually moved up through the ranks until getting the nod as president.

“The community college system creation was so important to West Virginia,” she said. “I was glad to be a part of it.”

Harris said the continual evolution of the community and technical college system has “opened up additional access” for students, including “greater access to a large number of courses.”

In a news release on the BridgeValley website, David Lewia, chair of the BridgeValley Board of Governors, said, “BridgeValley would not be the success it is today without Dr. Harris’ leadership. President Harris has undoubtedly laid the foundation for a bright future for the college.”

“Dr. Harris has been a transformational leader when it comes to the relationship between industry and higher education in West Virginia,” Dr. Sarah Tucker, chancellor of the Community and Technical College System of West Virginia, said on the website.

Harris is grateful for how her career unfolded. “Doors were opened to me that I never expected.”

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