Exit Interview

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Chancellor Joe Peterson

After 8 years as chancellor of USUE, Dr. Joe Peterson is calling it a career

It’s hard to talk to Dr. Joe Peterson about his career without concluding that he was the right guy at the right time for the right job.

A lifelong educator, Peterson has spent the last eight years as chancellor of Utah State University Eastern. He literally started the same day the College of Eastern Utah was to join USU as a satellite campus.

Friday is Peterson’s last day.

He and his lovely wife Becky, herself a retired elementary special education teacher, are leaving Price for St. George, where they will be closer to their grandkids and will begin a new chapter in their life together.

Peterson sat down with the Sun Advocate this week to discuss his career, his life, his love and his leaving.

Q. Are you a lifelong educator, or did you go into education from a different career field?

A. I have been a lifelong educator. I started as an English professor. I was teaching for Utah State University back in 1981.

Higher education is kind of imprinted on my family. My father was a faculty member at the College of Eastern Utah. He taught history.

He left CEU and was a faculty member at Utah State University where he retired.

My father and two of my uncles were educators at universities.

My grandfather, after whom I’m named, his name was Joe Peterson, he was an educator many, many years ago. He died when my father was very young, so I never knew him. But I am named after him.

He was an administrator over a thing called the Snowflake Academy.

It was a combination high school and early college in Snowflake, Arizona.

Q. Do you come from a Utah family?

A. Yes, my family was a Utah and Northern Arizona family.

Q. Are you married?

A. Yes, I am married to Becky, father of four kids, ranging in age nowadays from 38 to 27.

Q. When did you start at USUE?

I’ve been here since July of 2010. I came on the very day that the merger with Utah State University started.

Q. Where were you before that?

A. For three years previous I was at Salt Lake Community College. For 22 years before that I was at Dixie State in St. George. And before that I was at Utah State University. I’ve been at different colleges and universities around Utah.

Q. What are your retirement plans, what will you be doing?

A. Well, I am going to return to St. George. Like I said we lived there for 22 years and our children put down roots and had their children in St. George.

We are going to return to St. George and be near our grand kids. We are going to remodel an old condominium.

This is my hobby, is to remodel and build. I am going to remodel an old condominium and a home.

Q. How long have you been into building and remodeling?

A. Forever. I built a home once. I’ve finished basements and added garages, done major projects in homes for 40 years.

Kind of came from working in construction. Just caught the bug and kept doing it.

Q. What do you like to do most, as far as your hobby?

A. I can tell you what my least favorite and it’s plumbing. I usually have someone come help me with the plumbing. But I do the wiring. I do the finish work and the carpentry, the framing, the sheet rock, of course, the painting, hang doors.
Q. And does your wife have a role in this?

A. She is actually the second assistant as I do this. She’s had to hold up 12-foot sheets of sheet rock, and she’s a very small person, she’s only five-foot-two. She always complains that I ask her to do what a man would normally do.”

Q. When you got the opportunity to come to USUE, how did that happen when you were asked to come down to Price?

A. I kind of jumped at it. I spent my boyhood in Price. And I love Price. As I said my father was a faculty member here at this campus. So from the time I was 2 and a half until I was almost 14, I lived here in Price. As a boy I grew to love the landscape, the beauty, the place. But I also grew to love Carbon County people.

My wife was born in Price. She lived as a young child in Huntington. Her father was a coal miner in Hiawatha. Her father was born from a Greek family, named Jounakes.

Q. So you married into a Greek family?

A. As a boy I was sweet on two or three Greek girls. I’d give you their names, but you’d publish them. I was sweet on these girls who lived in town. They were beautiful girls. So when I went to college, I spotted Becky and I was attracted to her because she reminded me of the girls I was sweet on in elementary school.

Q. Tell me more about getting the job at USUE?

A. We had been living in Salt Lake and we started interviewing for this job. To do this interview we had to drive over here. As we came up Spanish Fork Canyon and came over Soldier Summit and dropped down into Price Canyon, we just knew that this was the place for us.

Q. What were some of the immediate challenges that you recognized?

A. CEU had a long-standing culture of its own. It needed to merge and become part of another place with a different culture, a different way of doing business. In general, it was a fairly smooth transition, but there were some rough spots.

My connection to the area made me profoundly motivated to make this work. I really, really, really wanted to provide what I saw was a fundamental service to the region. I thought I would be uniquely situated to provide that service. When I came I was very motivated to smooth out the bumps and make this thing work.

There were people in the community and people on campus, employees who were not happy. That was pretty tough.

Q. Are there advantages to being part of USU that the average person might not realize?

A. I would say there are two advantages. One is the expanded menu of educational offerings. That’s a big advantage. Things that were never here are here.

Another one is the leveraging of resources that we did not have as the College of Eastern Utah. We didn’t have the level of library or library services. We did not have the kind of expertise you have in a dozen offices. Because we are part of the university, we can tap into some really, really smart directors in dozens of offices at the university. They work on things that are intended to benefit this place.

Q. How is this transition here going to unfold when you leave?

A. I don’t know how long the search for a permanent replacement will take. There will be an interim chancellor, Dr. Gary Straquadine, a wonderful man who has been here for three years and has been kind of the second officer of the campus.

He will become the first officer of the campus. He is wonderfully prepared to do that. He knows the place, he knows the community. He is very, very prepared to do this. Then the university will spend some time to do the search for a permanent replacement.

Q. What are some accomplishments during your eight years that you will look back on with pride?

A. The first thing is the four-year programs; these are baccalaureate, four-year degrees. We started them as very, very small programs. Just a hand full of courses and a hand full of students and a hand full of teachers. That part of the campus has grown—it’s getting to be, I don’t know, 20 or 25 percent of who we are and what we do. It’s a very significant evolution.

And these are teachers, our business degrees, our social workers, our public lands managers, these are people who make great contributions to our region. And there are more of them, and I think will be more and more and more. I think it has taken off and that is the thing I am most proud of.

The second accomplishment is, our campus was in, our buildings and our infrastructure were in disarray. We had some aging buildings that were crumbling. They were not adequate to what we were trying to do here. We’ve replaced them with these functionally adequate facilities. We’ve got a new level of technology, a new level of classroom facilities, and all of this has come with significant
improvement to our infrastructure. Our campus is looking like a million bucks. It really looks good.

Q. How do you think the immediate future will unfold at USUE?

A. A major direction of the university is sending and receiving instruction throughout the state.

One thing we do here that CEU didn’t is we teach people in Logan. We teach people in Tooele. We teach people in Brigham City. Our courses that originate here are beamed everyplace. It’s a new business model. We have a new source of revenue.

It used to be that our business model was to teach local students, people who are here, and students we could convince to move here. Now we continue to have that part of our business model, but now we have this third component.

That is something that is well established, that is running very well. But it is also something that we’ve only started. The ability of the university to leverage its resources all throughout Utah, and raise the number of offerings and level of services in places all over the state is just starting. We’ve made significant progress, but, boy, that is going to be something to watch in the next decade.

Q. Is there anything else you’d like people to know before you go?

A. I can hardly describe, I am becoming inarticulate, but I can hardly describe what a privilege and a benefit and a blessing it has been to come here to this town, work in southeast Utah, rub shoulders with the finest people in the world, lead the best team that exists anywhere, the best faculty, the best staff, and work on a project that is so important. I am reduced to inarticulate stuttering because it has been such a great privilege. It has been such an amazing, amazing, wonderful experience.

I don’t deserve it. At my core, I am a rascal. How did I get so lucky to have this great privilege.

(Editor’s note: The contents of this interview were lightly edited for space.)

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