

LEADERSHIP ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

MAJ. GEN. (RET.) DONDI COSTIN '86



A SHEPHERD'S PATH

CADET TO CHIEF OF CHAPLAINS TO UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

By David Bitton

Chaplain Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Dondi Costin '86 had never heard of the U.S. Air Force Academy until Jay Dunham '83 led an informational session at North Carolina Boys State the summer before Gen. Costin's senior year of high school.

Two statements captured the teenager's attention. The Academy would prepare him to serve his country, and he'd receive a world-class education at government expense.

"The first part spoke loudly to me," Gen. Costin recalls, "and the second part spoke even more loudly to my mother."

That encounter set in motion a remarkable journey that would take the 2024 Leadership Achievement Award recipient from the Terrazzo to the Pentagon, from ministering during Basic Military Training to serving as the Air Force's 18th chief of chaplains and ultimately to leading Liberty University.

Yet for all his professional accomplishments, Gen. Costin insists the title he treasures most remains the simplest: chaplain.

"The opportunity to serve alongside warriors and their family members was the honor of a lifetime," he says.

THE UNLIKELY PATH

Gen. Costin's route to the chaplaincy was anything but direct. As a teenager, he sensed a calling to ministry but was paralyzed by fear of public speaking.

"I was probably called to the ministry in high school," he says. "But I was so afraid of the very thought of public speaking that I was sure I had misunderstood the Lord, which led me down the unlikely path of attending the Air Force Academy."

That unlikely path proved providential. The Academy's demanding environment forced the shy teenager out of his comfort zone. His operations research major provided analytical skills, while the relentless Academy regimen built the confidence he needed to eventually answer what he says is God's call on his life.

"Thankfully, in God's providence, the Academy education and key jobs as a young officer forced me out of my comfort zone and gave me enough confidence to finally say yes to God's call," he says. "For me, it was an immediate call to serve as an Air Force chaplain."

FORGED BY INFLUENCE

Gen. Costin's path was shaped by mentors who saw potential in him that he couldn't

see. He credits eighth-grade teacher Mercedes Newsome with giving him crucial confidence by holding him to what felt at the time like impossibly high standards.

"Without her influence, my education and career would have taken much different turns," he says.

At the Academy, influential figures continued molding his character.

He remembers AOCs Col. (Ret.) Bill Porter '70 and Col. (Ret.) Mark Hyatt '74 and Tommy Clemmons '86 from his hometown all having an impact.

Most memorably, he recalls Capt. Mark McCarthy '85, whose three-degree leadership left an indelible mark.

"He allowed no shortcuts and pulled no punches because he realized the importance of our training far more than we did," Gen. Costin says of McCarthy. "He would eventually give his life for his country, which only increased my admiration for him as a leader and my appreciation for his investment in our lives when we were all just teenagers. To the best of my ability, his legacy lives on through me."

Perhaps no single figure influenced Gen. Costin's spiritual development more than Chaplain Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Charles Baldwin '69.



Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Dondi Costin '86, Liberty University president, speaks during an April 2025 convocation in Lynchburg, Virginia. (Courtesy photo)

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“I often say my Baptist mother prayed that Baptist chaplain back to the Academy so I would have someone with a vested interest in my spiritual growth as a cadet,” Gen. Costin says of Gen. Baldwin. “He was the first chaplain I ever encountered — during Basic Cadet Training — and the Lord put me in his path on multiple timely occasions throughout my career. It has been clear to me since the summer of 1982 that Chaplain Charlie Baldwin is USAFA’s best foot forward. He really was an answer to my mother’s prayers and still is to mine.”

MINISTRY IN UNIFORM

Gen. Costin’s 32-year chaplain career began with him ministering to trainees at Basic Military Training and culminated as the Air Force’s senior chaplain. He completed four overseas assignments, including as U.S. Air Forces Central Command chaplain and Pacific Air Forces Command chaplain.

During his Middle East deployment, Gen. Costin oversaw the spiritual well-being of 28,000 warfighters, leading 22 teams across 10 countries that provided over 72,000 hours of face-to-face engagement, 31,000 counseling sessions and 7,000 worship services.

As chief of chaplains, Gen. Costin championed what he calls the Faith Works campaign, emphasizing both constitutional religious liberty and the demonstrated benefits of faith on warfighter resilience.

“The First Amendment applies equally to those who choose to exercise their faith commitments and those who have no such commitments,” he says. “But the

presence of the latter should not diminish the free exercise rights of the former, especially since the exercise of one’s faith is so demonstrably good for warfighters and their family members alike.”

His tenure included initiatives that improved effectiveness and efficiency, including relocating the Air Force Chaplain Corps College from Columbia, South Carolina, to Montgomery, Alabama, which returned chaplain corps education to the heart of Air University.

LEADING BY SERVING

Today, as president of Liberty University, Gen. Costin leads more than 140,000 students, including 40,000 affiliated with the military.

His leadership philosophy draws from his Academy training and his faith, organized around the acrostic LEADERS: lordship of Christ, environment, accountability, development, execution, results and shepherd.

“Some leaders focus so much on the people that they forget about the mis-

sion,” he says. “Others focus so much on the mission that they forget about the people. But the best leaders are aware enough of their tendencies to focus sufficiently on both.”

This balance, Gen. Costin believes, is at the heart of effective leadership.

“Having read every kind of leadership book you can imagine,” Gen. Costin notes, “I often say that every good leadership book says the same thing. The best leadership books focus on the fundamentals of balancing people and mission in pursuit of organizational effectiveness.”

THE TEAM BEHIND THE LEADER

True to Academy values, Gen. Costin is quick to deflect individual recognition.

“One of the most important lessons the Academy taught me was that military life is a team sport,” he says. “Individual recognition is primarily a reflection on the sacrifices of those who flourished behind the scenes.”

He’s particularly grateful for his wife, Vickey, a public school teacher for 23

years who sacrificed as they moved around the world.

“She is the rock star in this relationship,” he says.

Receiving the Leadership Achievement Award — which recognizes Academy graduates who have distinguished themselves through professional accomplishments — holds special significance for Gen. Costin.

“Like the proverbial turtle on a fencepost, I didn’t get here by myself. Not even close,” he says. “This award mostly acknowledges the contributions of others.”

That holds true at Liberty University, where Gen. Costin leads an institution that emphasizes holistic development.

The institution develops in its students “the values, knowledge and skills essential to impact their spheres of influence” across nearly every field of study, including one of the country’s largest collegiate aeronautics programs, robust ROTC programs, and medical and law schools.


“Much like the Academy, Liberty understands the value of a well-rounded education aimed at transforming men and women into servant leaders,” he says.

ENDURING GRATITUDE

As Gen. Costin reflects on his journey from Boys State to university president, he returns repeatedly to the Academy’s foundational influence.

“Those first four years after high school are probably the most transformative period of one’s adult life,” he says. “The bonding that occurs among brothers and sisters through shared experiences charts their future course.”

He thinks daily of his Bull Six classmates and the institution that believed in “a bunch of teenagers who knew a whole lot less than they thought they knew about life, service and sacrifice.

“As I engage in this kind of reflection, I’m reminded of Scripture’s admonition to give respect where respect is due and honor where honor is due,” Gen. Costin says. “None of us would be where we are today without the investment of this great institution. Thanks to our beloved alma mater for believing in us when we barely believed in ourselves.” 



Maj. Gen. (Ret.) Dondi Costin '86, Liberty University president, poses for a photo with a student during the university's 52nd commencement ceremony in May 2025 in Lynchburg, Virginia. (Courtesy photo)