Former President George H. W. Bush helped Union University stage the most successful Scholarship Banquet in the event’s eight-year history.

Donors gave $500,000 to Union’s scholarship fund, and 2,200 people packed the Carl Perkins Civic Center Sept. 21 to hear the nation’s 41st President speak of his faith and his experiences in office. Last year’s event with former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani raised just more than $400,000.

“It was a great night for Union University and for the students who will benefit from the generosity of so many,” said Union University President David S. Dockery, who hosted the event and led a question-and-answer session with Bush near the conclusion of the program.

Guests pledged between $1,000 and $15,000 for a record 135 tables. Table and balcony seats were sold out in early September, despite the fact that 21 tables (170 place settings) were added from last year’s floor plan.

“On a scale of one-to-10, it was an 11,” said Dr. Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn., near Memphis. “The president was so warm and folksy. I believe this program will insure to the welfare of the university in many ways well beyond the $500,000 raised.”

While serving in the Oval Office from 1989-1993, Bush saw the end of the Cold War, the reunification of Germany with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the liberation of Kuwait during his term.

Bush, who celebrated his 80th birthday in June by parachuting from an airplane in Texas, told the audience he does not feel entitled to any special privileges as a former U.S. President.

He urged younger people in the audience to serve their communities.

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Bush challenged listeners to “get off the sidelines” and serve the community. He told his audience good government depends entirely upon good people who are willing to serve others. He repeatedly referred to a “thousand points of light,” or caring citizens who serve the community, encouraging students to become one of the lights.

Kristen Ulmer, Student Government Association president, gave the invocation. She called it a once-in-a-lifetime experience and felt motivated by Bush’s remarks.

“It was a great chance to hear and see an example of servant leadership,” Ulmer said. “It was one of those conversations you’d have over a cup of coffee,” she said.

Brites addressed the issues of faith, family and values, and said his beliefs shaped his presidency. Bush said he agreed with Abraham Lincoln who said, “I cannot be president without spending some time on my knees.”

“I am a Christian, and believe in Christ,” Bush said.

Brites described his own childhood, which he said was rooted in strong moral instruction. “In my own life, my own parents helped shape my life. This university helps do that for the kids here,” Bush said. “I was privileged in the values I learned from my family – the same values that helped me when I was President.”

Brites also discussed the Christian faith of his son, President George W. Bush.

“Today the President is much more open with his faith. It is real. It is not posturing.” Concerning his family, Bush addressed the question of how it feels to see his son attacked by the media.

“It hurts far more to see my own son criticized than when I was under fire by the media,” Bush said. However, despite media criticism, Bush still holds the presidential office in high esteem. “I still feel like politics is a noble calling.”

“I really enjoyed all of his comments, especially about faith and values,” said Gary Taylor, a friend of Union University from Jackson. “I appreciate his transparency in letting us look inside his life from a non-political platform.”

The former President’s speech earned strong reviews from Union faculty and staff, who also helped contribute to the record fundraising total.

“He was very personable, and I think we got to see the core of a man who loves his family, loves his country and loves his God,” said Dr. Charles Baldwin, the O. P. & Evalyn Hammons University Professor of Pre-Medical Studies. “There was nothing pretentious about him.”