Despite the media regularly portraying her as a stereotypical 1950s housewife who kept her opinions to herself, former first lady Laura Bush has plenty of strong beliefs about national and international affairs. She shared some of those opinions during her address at Union University's 13th annual Scholarship Banquet at the Carl Perkins Civic Center in October. About 1,700 people were in attendance and together contributed about $600,000 for student scholarships, bringing to more than $5 million the total amount that has been raised for student support through annual event. Union also unveiled the new University video for 2010-11, entitled “Union University: Grounded in Excellence.”

In her keynote address, Bush talked about the eight years she spent in the White House, and about how she and her husband George are adjusting to their post-presidential life in Texas. “When you’re married to the president of the United States, you don’t worry too much about him leaving his towels on the floor,” she said. “But in Dallas, things are different.”

Bush said the last few years of history, beginning with her husband’s narrow win in the 2000 election, have been a transformative time in the United States and around the world. At the start of their term, Bush said they expected challenges from within the nation would be more substantial than international issues. But then the terrorists struck on Sept. 11, 2001, ushering in a new era in world history. Bush talked about her experience that day when she was first informed that a plane had hit the World Trade Center, and she remembers her thoughts lying in bed that night. Though she and her family members were safe, “All we could think about were the thousands of Americans who couldn’t say the same thing about their own loved ones,” she said. She also addressed some of the issues that became priorities for her during her time as first lady, such as literacy and women’s healthcare and education. “I believe that every child in America should learn to read,” Bush said. “I believe that literacy is an essential foundation for democracy. I know from my own experience as a reader and a librarian that books have the power not just to move people as individuals, but to shape our journey as a nation.”

During her time in the White House, Bush was also an advocate for the rights and freedoms of women, especially women in countries that denied them a voice in their government.

“Research shows that when you educate and empower women, you improve nearly every other aspect of society,” Bush said. “By giving women access to education and healthcare, they not only improve the wellbeing of their own families, but their communities and their countries as well.”

Bush recalled the day that she and George left the White House. Though the day was marked by a wide range of emotions, she said mostly they felt a solemn pride in the work they had done. She said her greatest honor as first lady was witnessing Americans facing up to their fears and standing proudly. Bush began her speech by quoting John Adams, who once said, “There are two educations—one should teach us how to make a living, and the other should teach us how to love.”

“Since its founding in 1823, Union University has taught its students both,” Bush said. “Thanks to Union University’s academically challenging curriculum, as well as its focus on practical applications, graduates leave Union prepared for a life of service.”

Prior to her address at the civic center, Bush visited the Union campus and spent a few minutes with about 20 student leaders. She spoke to Kristin Tisdale, a junior nursing major from Hendersonville, Tenn., about her future plans in the nursing field. “She’s got a great presence,” Tisdale said. “She’s done a lot of great things. Being a first lady, it’s definitely a position of not necessarily power, but influence that not many people can have, especially in her field of study of library science.”

Mitch Roeder, a senior from Earle, Ark., and president of Union’s Student Government Association, also had a chance to speak to Bush.

“You always see her on TV and hear stories about her, and it’s neat to actually be able to have a conversation with her,” Roeder said. “She has a love for education and a love for people, and the way that she pushes herself to help other people is admirable.”

Lead Sponsors for the event included BancorpSouth, Gary and Susan Grisham; Black & Decker Industrial Products Group; Carl and Alice Kirkland; and White Investments, LLC, Ray L. and Martha White.

Premier Sponsors included Keith and Beverly Ashby; James and Janet Arens; First Bank; Curris and Joan Mansfield; David and Lanese Dockery; Impact 360; John and Trudy (Cathy) White; Hammond Charitable Foundation; Jack and Zan Holmes; The Jackson Sun; Nortek, Inc., Lloyd and Martha Hansen; Northwestern Mutual Financial Network; Rick and Amy Parker; Lou and Rosemary Oberndorf; Jack and Faye Porter; Harry and Beth Smith; Thad and Alicia Smotherman; and West Tennessee Healthcare.