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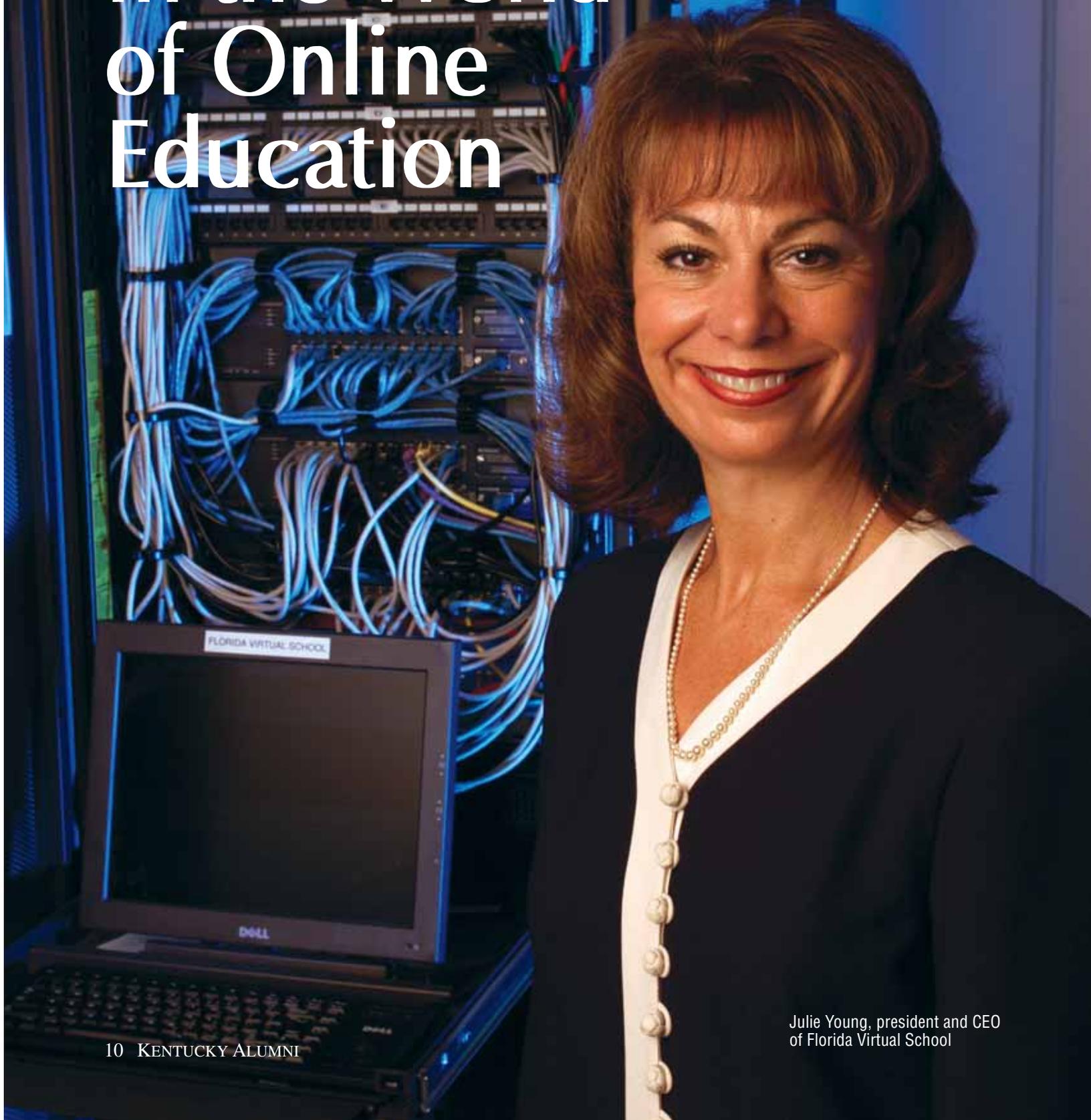
Winter 2004

Julie Young:
Making a
Difference
with Online
Education

A Family Legacy • UKAN

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Earning A+ in the World of Online Education



Julie Young, president and CEO
of Florida Virtual School

UK Grad Julie Young leads the Florida Virtual School — The Nation's Largest Precollegiate Online School

By Robin Roenker

Julie Young loves teaching.

So much so that at her first job, as a sixth grade teacher at Lexington's St. Peters and Paul School, she often forgot to pick up her paycheck.

"My husband used to tease me and say, 'This is not volunteer work. There must be a paycheck somewhere,'" jokes Young, a 1981 graduate of the UK College of Education.

"But I really enjoyed teaching so much, sometimes getting paid didn't enter my mind."

More than 20 years later, Young's passion for teaching is still going strong.

Now the president and CEO of Florida Virtual School — the nation's largest precollegiate online school — Young is one of the foremost authorities on issues of online education and distance learning in America.

A Vat of Chocolate

Julie Elkin Young and her husband, Bruce Young, a 1980 UK College of Engineering graduate, originally had no plans to leave Kentucky.

Young grew up in Lexington only a mile from Commonwealth Stadium; her father and older brother were UK alumni, and so going somewhere else for college "never got a second thought," she says.

Her four years at UK were full of great memories with her sorority sisters in Alpha Gamma Delta.

"I really loved the whole Greek experience at UK," Young says. "We had a great time, and I feel like I got a wonderful education."

When she graduated from UK, Young expected to teach in Lexington for a while, and then become a stay-at-home mom to concentrate on raising her kids full-time, as her own mother had done.

Those plans changed when Young stepped into the classroom and "fell in love with teaching," she says. It was a career that let her work and still balance the needs of her young family: sons Brett, now 20, and Taylor, 16.

Bruce's job with IBM took the Youngs from Kentucky to Ft. Myers, Fla., in 1984, and then to Orlando, where they've lived since 1996.

In Ft. Myers, Julie taught elementary school for six years before becoming a curriculum and technology specialist and assistant principal.

As technology coordinator in 1989, Young helped network her school, San Carlos Park Elementary, putting four computers in every classroom and launching an IBM pilot program called "Teaching and Learning with Computers."

That role led to a two-year joint position with the Lee County Schools and IBM, in which Young trained teachers throughout the district about how to integrate computers into the classroom.

These experiences were what laid the groundwork for Young's foray into virtual education in 1996.

Having recently moved to Orlando, Young got a call from the Orange County deputy superintendent, Bob Williams. He told her the district was interested in a technology grant and wanted to speak with her.

At their meeting, she soon suspected this was more than a casual chat.

"After about 15 minutes," Young says, "I asked Dr. Williams, 'Is this an interview?' And he said, 'Yes, actually it is.'"

When Williams explained to Young that Orange County was looking for a principal for an online high school that it was developing, Young warned him that "what I knew at that time about high school stemmed from my experience several years ago in high school," she says.



Virtual learning has taken off in recent years. Across the country, some 40,000-50,000 K-12 students are currently participating in online courses. To date, 12 states have established online high school programs and 5 others are developing them, while 25 states allow for the creation of "cyber" charter schools, and 32 states offer e-learning initiatives.

Launched in January 2000, the Kentucky Virtual High School (KVHS) currently has an enrollment of 550 students. It offers approximately 50 online courses, many of which were originally developed by Florida Virtual School.

Linda Pittenger, KVHS director, says Julie Young has been "gracious and a tremendous help" as Pittenger worked to develop Kentucky's virtual school program.

The role of virtual education, Pittenger says, is to help "model new ways of reaching students."

"It's crucial that we move away from an education model based on seat time in a classroom and move to one based on tailored learning," she says. "That type of thinking is natural in an online learning environment."

FEATURE



Photo: Todd Anderson © 2004

Julie Young, left, shares a moment with Nancy Clawson, executive assistant, in Young's office.

"But he chuckled and told me they were interested in someone who didn't know a lot about traditional high schools," Young says. "They wanted someone who knew a lot about kids, had good people skills and was able to carry a vision forward."

They wanted Young.

She accepted the position with what would become Florida Virtual School (FLVS) on Dec. 2, 1996. An assistant principal at an Orlando elementary school at the time, it was an unexpected career move — Young admits the position "kind of dropped out of the sky."

One of Young's colleagues likes to joke that Young "fell into a vat of chocolate" when she got the job. "That's true," Young says. Working with FLVS "has been the most wonderful, rewarding experience of my career."

All Students Can Learn

Launched in 1997 and based in Orlando, Florida Virtual School now offers 85 online classes — from English and

biology to algebra, Spanish, art history, and even physical education — for students in grades 7 through 12.

It currently serves about 16,000 students who take, on average, 2.5 classes each with FLVS — for a total of some 30,000 active course enrollments.

In the past five years, FLVS has enjoyed "tremendous growth," Young says. Despite employing some 200 teachers and increasing its enrollments by 5,000 to 10,000 per year, it still has students on waiting lists.

"Julie Young has built one of the most highly acclaimed online high school networks in the world," says John G. Flores, executive director of the United States Distance Learning Association. "Her leadership, character, and caring personality have allowed her to nurture a program that others judge themselves against."

The vast majority of FLVS students are Florida residents who can take the courses for free, though it does serve about 300 tuition-based students from other states as well. FLVS also markets its courses to other states, including Kentucky, for their own virtual school programs.

Twenty percent of FLVS students are home-schooled. Other students sign up to take advantage of a class their local school doesn't offer. Still others may have a scheduling conflict or want to retake a class they didn't pass originally. Only one percent of the school's students use FLVS as their only source of education.

Young has worked hard to build partnerships with Florida's traditional school systems. The mission of Florida Virtual School, she says, is not to compete with other schools, but rather to "fill the gaps and broaden the base of opportunity for students.

"With Florida Virtual School, if I'm from a small rural district, all of a sudden I have an advanced placement program, whereas I may never have had one before," she says.

FLVS helps level the educational playing field, Young says. Now all Florida students — whether they live in rural or urban school districts — have "equal access to the same high quality courses."

Once enrolled, students and their parents correspond with instructors through weekly e-mails, phone calls, and instant messaging sessions, but there is no set online "meeting" schedule and no required face-to-face interaction.

Another difference from traditional schools: most courses do not use textbooks. Instead, the instructional

materials are almost exclusively online, so that they can be updated at a moment's notice.

Robby Queen, now a college freshman at West Virginia University, enrolled in a Web design class through FLVS in 2000-2001 while attending high school in Logan, W. Va.

Individualized attention makes virtual learning an attractive alternative for many students, but at first, Queen was skeptical of how the online learning process would work.

"I wondered how an instructor in Florida, 17 hours away, was going to teach me," Queen admits. But once he got into a routine of almost daily e-mails with the instructor, he "saw that the distance wasn't going to be an issue. It was like the instructor was right in my home, teaching me one-on-one."

Young believes the school's high pass rate of 90-95 percent proves the philosophy of education she's always lived by. "Given the appropriate instruction and the appropriate timetable, all students can learn," she says.

Any Time, Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace

"The Florida Virtual School motto is any time, any place, any path, any pace," Young explains. "For the first time in my career, I really feel that we have the latitude with this technology to put together a truly student-centered program. That is not a criticism of our traditional schools. They have start times, end times, and bells and boundaries that we don't have. Now all of a sudden students can be in the privacy of their home with a Coke and a cookie and headphones if they want, at the time of the day that works best for them. And parents can be in their classrooms 24-7."

What makes an ideal online student? It's an issue of self-motivation rather than a question of GPA, Young says.

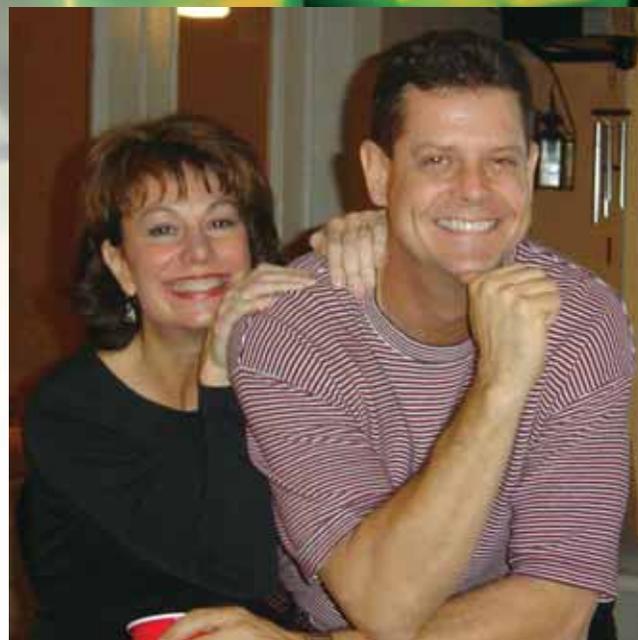
For some students who've struggled in a traditional classroom environment, the virtual courses offer a different type of learning venue in which they feel comfortable asking questions or seeking additional help.

"With the online format, I get to teach in a classroom of one," says Jo Wagner of Ft. Myers, who has taught an online physical education course with FLVS for the past three years. "If one student needs 45 minutes of my time on the phone to explain a concept, that's fine. I can provide that attention without inconveniencing or holding any other student back. I wouldn't be able to do that in a traditional classroom setting."

Making a Difference

As a hall of fame inductee and board member for the United States Distance Learning Association and a board member on the North American Council for Online Learning, Young's expertise in educational technology and distance learning is in high demand.

She's quoted routinely in national articles on online education, and she travels frequently, helping advise



Julie Elkin Young '81 and her husband, Bruce Young '80, moved to Florida in 1984.

At a Glance

Name: Julie Carol Elkin Young

Degrees: B.A., Elementary Education, UK College of Education, 1981
M.S., Administration and Supervision, University of South Florida, 1987

Family: Husband, Bruce Young, UK College of Engineering, 1980
Sons: Brett, 20, and Taylor, 16

Hobbies: Watching her sons play basketball, following UK basketball, and boating

Quick Fact: Her cell phone plays the UK fight song whenever a family member calls.

Selected Awards: 1999 United States Distance Learning Association Most Outstanding Achievement by an Individual Award for K-12 Education; 2003 Hall of Fame Inductee, United States Distance Learning Association

Selected Memberships: Board Member, United States Distance Learning Association; Board Member, North American Council for Online Learning

Florida Virtual School Web Site: www.flvs.net

other states who hope to imitate the success Florida has seen with its virtual school.

But the heart of her work is still the same as it has always been: making a difference in the lives of her students.

Earlier in her career as a teacher in Ft. Myers, Young came across a third-grade student who was "such a struggle." She worked with him, intent on helping turn things around. At the end of the year, when he won an award for character, he rewarded her with a hug, saying, "I am me because of you."

It was a watershed moment for Young, reminding her just what it is about teaching that she loves so much.

Robin Roenker '98 AS is a freelance writer in Lexington.