Marc Johnson learned responsibility early in life.

Growing up on a farm/orchard south of Wichita, Kan., Johnson and his brother, Scott, were in charge of operations related to the family’s business. Operations included growing everything from wheat, sorghum and soybeans, peaches, pears, cherries, apples, strawberries, sometimes sweet corn and tomatoes, as well as selling local produce from neighboring farms at the Johnson family country store.

Scott disliked working outside. Marc, who has since gone on to become an avid hiker, always enjoyed working outdoors.

"So we split duties," Marc Johnson recalled. He chuckled lightly at the memory. "My brother took care of the air-conditioned country store, and I did most of the outside work, managing hoeing crews and picking crews.

"We both liked it that way."

Then Johnson, who was appointed the 16th president of the University of Nevada, Reno in April, paused. His experience as a young man, when his parents, Leo and Mary, had given both their sons “an evolving amount of responsibility through time,” as Johnson put it, had certainly helped prepare him for much of what was to come.

In April 2011, Johnson, executive vice president and provost of the University since 2008, received the worst possible news: Milton Glick, the University’s 15th president, had died of a massive stroke.

For the next year, as interim president, Johnson calmly and effectively led the University through a final series of budget reductions. Yet, even with the reductions, the University, amazingly, was continuing to excel at record levels. Milestones included: record enrollment of 18,004 students in fall 2011; record graduation rates; record number of National Merit Scholars on campus; record faculty productivity levels, and being classified among the nation’s top 100 public universities as a “Tier I” institution by U.S. News & World Report.

At a time when the wheels could have easily come off the 138-year-old institution, Johnson provided continuity and stability.

"Marc Johnson has always kept the University’s fundamental priorities at the forefront of everything he has done,” said English professor Stacy Burton. "My regard for him only increased in the year he was interim president. He hasn’t simply kept the ship afloat. Far from it. He has kept the University moving forward.”

Nevada System of Higher Education Regent Rick Trachok ’74 (plant science), a prominent local attorney, said Johnson has given the community an opportunity to "see how he performs, in good times and in bad. Don’t ever underestimate the value of that. He is
somebody who has a vision, somebody who is a constant presence in the community, someone who took a traumatized institution and kept it moving on its upward trajectory."

And to think that the personal strengths of accountability and responsibility were sown early, on the family farm in Kansas.

“My father and mother were very good at teaching me by experience,” Johnson, 64, said with a smile. “As long as I was doing well, they always gave me lots of latitude to learn how to do things. That’s been very important. It gave me a very strong work ethic, and it gave me confidence in my own abilities.”

As Johnson begins his first full academic year in August as the University’s permanent president, he has both short-term plans and a long-term vision for the campus. He is quick to point out that the work won’t be easy; however, his confidence in the University’s students, staff and faculty has never been higher.

“The people at our University have been amazingly resilient through tough times,” he said. “We’ve really relied on everybody doing at least their job, if not more. They’ve all pitched in. That’s one of the really remarkable things about our University.”

In a wide-ranging interview with Nevada Silver & Blue, Johnson articulated his expectations and hopes for the University:

Short-term and long-term plans: “I think one of our first responsibilities is to build in our faculty and staff the confidence that our finances and opportunities have stabilized and turned the corner. The 8 percent registration fee increase for next year allowed us to identify 15 new faculty positions to start growing our faculty back, and it sends a very strong message that we are building again. We also now are working on restoring some of what we have lost out of our research infrastructure so that we can help faculty be more successful in competitive research. Also, we are looking at a new opportunity of keeping our tuition and fees on campus, which will assure further growth potential.

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—President Marc Johnson

“Further, we’re developing a new enrollment management strategy so that we can purposefully grow our student body, especially among students who will have a high probability of graduating. In this way, we’ll grow, make more revenue, and add back more faculty and staff positions and still increase our graduation rates. We’re also reviewing priority facility plans. A couple of projects we have in mind are to build a student achievement center so that we can pull all of our services for the students together, to help them graduate. We are looking at some enhancements to athletic facilities, as well as to the Church Fine Arts Building. In the longer term, we really need to work on a new building for engineering and sciences. Engineering has some of the oldest facilities of any college on campus.

“The medical school is being transformed in two dimensions, as well. One is to become a truly balanced, statewide medical school in terms of functional and geographic dimensions. The second is to develop a robust clinical research mission to take discovery to treatment.”

The University’s philosophy regarding economic development: “Economic development is based on building a base industry—which means that you have an industry that is bringing in money from outside this economy, and you swirl this money around, inside your local economy. The University does that all the time. Our 18,000 students are living here, they’re studying here, and after about four years, they make themselves available on the job market. So now we have just converted a number of people into highly professionally-educated people, right here in Reno, and they are ready for any of our businesses or nonprofit organizations to hire. Last year we brought in $81 million of competitive grants—most of it from federal sources, most of it taxpayer money that comes from resources from all over the United States—and we’re bringing it here to Reno, much of it creating professional jobs.

“We also reach out and participate with industry and local community leaders in making the community attractive to bring in other businesses. I carry around a business card with two phone numbers: one to the Technology Transfer Office and one to the Small Business Development Center. I carry these so that any-
President Johnson with members of the University’s Concrete Canoe Team during the 25th Annual ASCE National Concrete Canoe Competition hosted by the University of Nevada, Reno June 14-16. Nevada’s team finished fourth in the competition, which included 22 schools and 400 participants.

“Moving to the Mountain is going to be quite challenging. Their coaches’ salaries are significantly more than our coaches’ salaries. The support for scholarships is higher than for our student-athletes. We will have to rise to that challenge, do things like build nice athletic facilities—not Taj Mahals, but nice facilities—and build our scholarships and build our salaries for coaches. If we do those things, we will be successful.”

The search for a new executive vice president and provost: “I was given some real opportunities by Milt Glick to work alongside him, not only to handle budget issues on the campus, and to manage the internal workings of the campus operation, but he also involved me with some of our donors and I got to know them pretty well. He prepared me well to step into the president’s role in a way that I could carry on in a very consistent fashion and use my experience to help bring businesses here. The University also makes the community a great place to live with arts, sports and speaker events.”

Capital campaign goals: “Some of the planning has already started. We’re preparing for a request for proposal for a campaign consultant. We will need more staffing. We have started some of the nuts and bolts elements, and now we’ll really engage the faculty in the fall to work through some of the fine-tuning of strategic plans and turn those plans into glitches.”

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Membership in the Mountain West Conference: “Our athletic director and our coaches have been very good in paying attention to the welfare of our student-athletes and the academic performance of our student-athletes, and that is shown by the fact that we have one of the higher graduation rates for student-athletes in the country. The institutions in the Mountain West are very like-minded in this way, which is a good thing.

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