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## Up Close: The Furman Connection

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Judi Wilson '90, Ashley Gess '95 and Zach Kelehear '81 on the Augusta University campus.

## UP CLOSE

### The Furman Connection

Three alums are leading the way at Augusta University.

**Z**ach Kelehear '81, Judi (Harris) Wilson '90 and Ashley Gess '95 share a common bond as teachers and Furman alumni.

Though they graduated at separate times over nearly 15 years, their Furman connection binds and guides them as they lead the education program and train future teachers at Augusta University in Augusta, Georgia.

Kelehear, a native of Dalton, Georgia, came to Furman on a football scholarship, earned B.A. degrees in history and Latin (1981), and an M.A. in education (1982). After

earning his Ed.D. from North Carolina State University, he returned to Furman to teach in the education department.

He later taught at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and then at the University of South Carolina, where he was promoted to associate dean for academic affairs in 2011. Kelehear joined Augusta University in 2015 as dean of the college of education. Augusta University's College of Education offers undergraduate and graduate degrees to about 1,100 students.

When he arrived in Augusta, Kelehear saw in Wilson a "remarkably powerful" edu-

cator and appointed her as associate dean in July 2016.

"Dr. Wilson is a steady and thoughtful educator. She is committed to her students and provides impactful teaching every day, in each class," says Kelehear.

Wilson, who spent a decade as a public school teacher and administrator in Georgia, says her career in higher education was directly influenced by a talk with her advisor at Furman, Doris Blazer, associate professor of education emerita.

"I had never considered teaching in higher education,

but that powerful conversation altered the trajectory of my whole life. I will always be grateful to her for taking the time to invest in me through her words," says Wilson, a Durham, North Carolina, native who graduated with a B.A. in elementary education. "That day, Dr. Blazer cast a vision for me much larger than I might have ever cast for myself. I do my best each day to 'pay it forward' and do the same for our students at Augusta University."

When a position leading the university's science, technology, engineering, the arts and mathematics (STEAM) initiative was created, Kelehear again looked to a Paladin who was also one of his former students.

Gess, a native of Fort Mill, South Carolina, earned her M.A. in secondary education with an emphasis in biology from Furman in 1995 and completed her Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction with an emphasis in integrative science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education from Virginia Polytechnic and State University in 2015.

"The professors at Furman empowered me to teach from my heart, using research to inform my practice," says Gess. "I know what kind of experience Zach and Judi have been through—the dedication and drive that it took to excel at Furman—because I did it too! We are all bringing that drive and our skills and work ethic to Augusta University every day. In my mind, the Furman connection gives us an edge and makes us stronger."

— by Kelley Brass