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## Up Close: Instrument of Change

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## UP CLOSE

### Instrument of Change

At a time of racial disharmony, one of Furman's first African-American students found a way through music.

**R**aymond McGee '71 is a serious man—and never more so than when it comes to music. So much so that each passing year, McGee celebrates his devotion to the art as one would a wedding anniversary. In August, he marked 50 years with his beloved bass by performing a concert at Anderson University that included several of his students and fellow musicians.

He told them it would be a revival of a Furman senior recital he had more than 40 years ago.

McGee was first recognized for his talent in high school in Asheville, NC. At that time, he was introduced to Peter Rickett, the longtime Greenville Symphony Director who died in 2014. Rickett took an interest in the young protégé and began to privately tutor him on

the double bass while McGee commuted back and forth. "It was five dollars for the lessons and five dollars for gas," McGee explains.

By his senior year of high school, the Furman band came to Asheville for a recruitment tour. "They asked me if I would come to Furman. I had a full scholarship to attend Duke and only a partial one for Furman." But the influence of Peter Rickett and **John Duggan '69**, an older member of the band, convinced him Furman would be worth the extra cost.

At Furman, McGee majored in double bass performance and filled his hours playing with the Greenville, Asheville, and Hendersonville symphonies. But the year was 1967, and Furman—only two years into official integration since **Joe Vaughn '68** matriculated in January of 1965—was experiencing both racial division and Vietnam War tension.

"During my freshman year, my roommate and I had gone to bed and were awakened by a disturbance outside," McGee recounts. "It sounded like a bomb went off, and we realized someone threw a Mason jar through the window." He recalls this incident with obvious discomfort but also explains that it was the only act of violence he faced.

Still, there were other racially charged events for McGee. One was intricately linked with his love for music. "I was in the marching band, and in that time the fight song for Furman was *Dixie*. I spoke with our director about not playing it anymore and the next summer, at band camp, it was not in our folder. I thought we'd gotten rid of it. But during the first home game that fall, the band struck it up without the music. I left the game in protest. I was later called into the student band council and dismissed."

Shortly thereafter, President Gordon Blackwell summoned McGee and seven other students over for lunch. "I still remember we had these big hamburgers with bacon, lettuce, and tomato—it was maybe the best lunch I have had. President Blackwell asked how we were doing and brought up *Dixie*. He looked at me and said, 'Ray, you can go back because the students don't have the authority to dismiss you.' I decided I'd rather play in the orchestra and didn't return. But they didn't play *Dixie* after that," McGee says.

McGee was the first African American in Phi Mu Alpha, the music fraternity, and stayed involved while also playing for the ROTC band. It was during his freshman year that he faced another challenge: He learned his mother had passed away. "I was able to come back shortly after the funeral, just in time to play DuPre Rhome's 24 *Messiah*," he remembers. Music was once again a refuge.

After Furman, McGee attended graduate school at Florida State University and completed course work for a doctorate in music education. From 1979 to 2011 he was a strings teacher with the Greenville County School District. For 20 years, he was also the director of Honors Orchestra, an after-school orchestra in the school district.

McGee still plays in a string quartet—on the cello, adding another instrument to his repertoire—as part of the Upstate Senior Citizens band, and works part time at Anderson University. Although the term "pioneer" would likely make McGee uncomfortable, his love for his art has propelled McGee through history, and in the process allowed him to make it, too. **E**

—Kate Dabbs '09