Summer China Experience: Matt Alexander '09

Furman University

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Summer China Experience
Matt Alexander ’09

The Alexander identity

Matt Alexander ’09 is somewhat of a contradiction. On one hand, he’s a former Asian Studies major at Furman who’s now pursuing his master’s in real estate development at Clemson. But on the other hand, he’s a tough U.S. Army captain who graduated from the ROTC program at Furman and went into the Georgia Army National Guard to fly Blackhawk helicopters in Iraq as part of the MEDEVAC Corps.

If it sounds a little Jason Bourne to you, it’s not by accident. This is a man who knows what he wants and goes after it.

“Prior to my freshman year at Furman, an Asian Studies grant allowed me to travel to China, all expenses paid, for three weeks during the summer. The only thing I had to do was take Mandarin as my language requirement.”

He continues: “But I was intrigued by the interplay between the U.S. and China foreign policy, and stunned by how much the Chinese influenced history, and how much Chinese history affects our lives today. Becoming an Asian Studies major was an easy sell for me.”

And it was his major that also shaped his world view. That, and an eight-month stint in Iraq.

“As Americans, we’re really isolated from the rest of the world.” He pauses, considering his words carefully. “I saw this in China and then again in Iraq. It’s humbling to travel and live in other places in the world and then come back here. Unless you’ve done it, it’s hard to really recognize how blessed we truly are in this country. But in some ways, I guess it’s by design. I serve my country to protect our way of life. I am so grateful to have had that experience. To see firsthand our place in this world. I couldn’t have done it without my major or my military experience.”

He laughs when asked if he’s actually used his degree. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. I interned with Greenville Mayor Knox White over the summer and he hosted several Chinese delegations during my tenure there. My degree and basic language skills definitely came in handy.”

Asian Studies

As a leading expert on the world’s investment markets, Ravenel Curry ’63 understands the expanding role that Asia plays in the world’s economy and, increasingly, in U.S. foreign policy.

To foster student understanding and engagement with countries like China, the former trustee provided a $1 million gift to Furman’s Asian Studies program, primarily for Chinese Studies, propelling the program into a cross-disciplinary engine for cultural, economic, and political study of the region featuring language acquisition, foreign study, and research.

Most recently, Curry pledged $300,000 to support Political Science’s Tocqueville Program.