A Milestone Matriculation

Furman University

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A MILESTONE MATRICULATION

During the 2014–2015 academic year, Furman University will commemorate a milestone in its history: the admission of the first African American student and, therefore, the establishment of desegregation at a school that was founded, by its own 1826 charter, as an “academy-seminary” for young white men to train for the ministry.

Desegregation at Furman was a microcosm of its time—a controversial and embattled departure that ultimately was the result of many pioneers, though none more trailblazing than Joseph Allen Vaughn ’68, who embodied the historical moment when he stepped onto Furman’s campus as its first black student in February of 1965.

Vaughn—who was chosen by Francis Bonner (then Furman’s vice president and dean) and Sapp Funderburk ’39 (a Greenville businessman) to attend Furman from Sterling High School in Greenville—had been president of his senior class, a member of the school’s honor society, and a Baptist. He distinguished himself at Furman as an English major and French minor; a member of the Baptist Student Union and the Collegiate Educational Service Corps, for which he helped develop a support program for high school dropouts; and a cheerleader.

He also belonged to the Furman chapter of the South Carolina Student Organizing Committee, a politically active group that demonstrated for civil rights at a time when such convictions incited dangerous reactions.

After Furman, Vaughn went on to become a beloved teacher in Greenville County. He served as president of the South Carolina Education Association and participated in a gubernatorial task force on educational improvement. He died in 1991.

Plans are under way to pay tribute to Vaughn’s legacy and to explore the larger, and still relevant, implications it represents. Events this fall and next spring include keynote speeches by thought leaders on race in America; a black alumni reunion gathering at Homecoming; a fundraising gala for the Joseph Vaughn Scholarship; and the commission of an original music piece, photographic exhibit, website, and booklet. Furman also awarded honorary doctorates to Lillian Brock Flemming ’71 and Sarah Reece ’71, two of the first African American women to graduate from the university. Learn more about the year by visiting furman.edu/50years.

NEXT

Reflection on the Importance of Furman Going Forward

Fifty-eight years ago, my Furman education began. In the ensuing years, of course, many things have changed. Some have even remained the same. But what I’ve realized, from the vantage point of having become a Furman professor, is that there is one thing that should never change: the innate love for learning that permeates a Furman education.

I realize that the notion of love of learning can be a trite and corny concept to use, but it’s such a compelling and powerful concept that I use it in spite of the danger of not being taken seriously. I’m talking about a love driven not by the flow of hormones but by the firing of synapses, by the encoding of understanding in memory molecules.

It may surprise people to know that those of us who spend our lives at Furman have a deep and abiding love for those who “pass through” in four short years. We often disguise this feeling so well that we ourselves fail to recognize it.

But one understanding of this love is that as parental love ensures the survival of its DNA by the care and nurturing of its offspring, we professors at Furman are also investing in the future DNA of our collective intellectual gene pool by nurturing our students.

We care deeply about those who will do the things we have not done. We aim to inspire all those who will take the treasures that a love of learning unearths to the marketplace, the classroom, the stage, the laboratory, the legislature, the pulpit, the battlefield, the hospital, the mountain trail, the city slum—anywhere those ideas and insights and passions will enrich life in a way that transcends physical and biological constraints.

Civilization began when this intellectual gene investment took hold as a driving force in society. The future of Furman—the future of everything an education touches beyond Furman—resides in the creative elaboration of this type of love.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Tony Arrington graduated from Furman in 1960 with a major in chemistry; he received his PhD from Harvard in 1964. Following postdoctoral study, Arrington returned to Furman as a faculty member in the chemistry department. He has conducted research at the University of British Columbia, the University of Utah, Los Alamos National Laboratory, and Oak Ridge. He also served as chair of the department for six years.

Illustration by Jack Dylan