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## John Plyler '56

Jim Stewart '76  
*Furman University*

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## John Plyler '56

BY JIM STEWART '76



**J**ohn Laney Plyler Jr. '56, son of John Laney Plyler, Furman's longest-serving president (1939–64), enjoyed a distinguished career in health and hospital administration, most of it in North Carolina. Mr. Plyler supports many programs at Furman and serves as a donor to the Partners Program to give students unique opportunities. Now a resident of The Woodlands at Furman, he is a recipient of the university's Alumni Service Award (2002) and Bell Tower Award (2005). For an extended video interview with Mr. Plyler, visit [scholarexchange.furman.edu/oral-histories/32](http://scholarexchange.furman.edu/oral-histories/32).

**You were just a child when your father became Furman's president. What stands out about growing up on the downtown campus?**

**JP:** I was 5 and my brother Jim was 3 when we moved to the campus. (Brother Keith was born a few years later.) Very few children our age lived nearby, so the campus became our playground and the students became our friends. They made us feel special.

We liked to hang out with the athletes. One in particular was Rhoten Shetley (class of 1940), who was a football star. He was apparently taking a child psychology course, and he needed to observe some children. He chose Jim and me, and we enjoyed the attention.

Now, Jim and I could get to tussling every now and then. One day Rhoten told us that if we would go a week without tussling, he'd arrange for us to sit on the bench with the players at the next game. He said he'd check back on Friday. Well, we made it to Thursday, but when he asked we were honest and told him the truth. So we didn't get to go to the game. But I remember hearing the yells from the stadium through my window that night – Furman defeated Georgia, 20-0.

**What were some of your father's finest qualities?**

**JP:** He knew everything was a team effort... he was always careful to give credit to others. He was extremely organized and very good at bringing people around to his way of thinking. He could talk with someone and when they were finished, the person would think everything was their idea. He knew how to strike that fine balance between keeping everyone happy and doing what ought to be done, which wasn't always easy. And he never compromised his ideals.

**Talk a little about your mother, Beatrice Dennis Plyler.**

**JP:** She was just 28 years old when my father became president. (He was 44.) Mother was always young at heart, and people just fell in love with her. She had a real talent for design. She was involved in the decorating and furniture selections for the new campus, and she suggested having fountains. After she mentioned it, the architects determined how to tie them into the air-conditioning system.

**What would your father think about Furman today?**

**JP:** He was a forward-thinking man, and he knew what a top liberal arts college could be. He also understood your goals change and evolve over time. He valued the sense of community that a smaller school has and wanted a campus second





President Plyler with sons John (left) and Jim on Father's Day, 1938.

## “I BELIEVE HE SAW FURMAN AS IT IS TODAY, AND HE'D BE QUITE PLEASED WITH THE UNIVERSITY'S DIRECTION.”

to none in beauty. And he especially knew the importance of a strong faculty, that the faculty makes the school. I believe he saw Furman as it is today, and he'd be quite pleased with the university's direction. Elizabeth Davis is a wonderful leader. She began her presidency listening to others, then evaluating what could be done in a visionary way, very much like my father.

**Speaking of Dr. Davis, how can alumni contribute to the success of her signature program, The Furman Advantage, with its emphasis on transformative education and lifetime connections?**

**JP:** A few years ago, I was talking with a graduate who told me how she had continued to maintain a relationship with a professor. This professor was still mentoring the young lady years after she graduated. I thought it was remarkable. So I went to the professor and thanked her as an alumnus for having such a life-changing influence on students.

Alumni can fill the same kind of role, but we have to be willing to listen to students and understand what their goals are, what experiences they've had and where they're coming from. We can use that knowledge to help guide them or suggest new or different ways of thinking. It's important for us to listen, though, and not simply direct; it can't be a one-way thing. If we do it right, Furman is going to be something else. ●



## NEXT

### *Reflection on Furman going forward*

“Have you heard of The Furman Advantage?” So quipped President Elizabeth Davis at Furman's September 2017 Opening Convocation. After the collective sighs, eye rolls and eventual laughter subsided, I was struck by a poignant moment of self-reflection: For the first time since I arrived at Furman seven years earlier, I was not adjusting to new classes, learning the names of my students, nor sharing the academic calendar's peculiar ebbs and flows as a teaching professor. Having assumed my role as The Furman Advantage coordinator on July 1, I officially had, as multiple faculty colleagues teased, “gone over to the dark side” (aka the administration).

Cue the questions. What do I see in The Furman Advantage that makes it more than just another vision statement? How have I been persuaded to leave the classroom space I relish for its dynamic interchange of ideas? What has convinced me to shift away from daily interactions with energetic undergraduates and to embrace an entirely new position?

The Furman Advantage is unified, coherent and transformative. It not only builds upon Furman's historic strengths – such as outstanding instruction and an abiding commitment to engaged learning – but also facilitates students' guided discovery, exploration and pursuit of individualized pathways through both conversations with mentors and their own self-reflection. The Furman Advantage approaches education holistically, recognizing, for example, that leadership

experiences outside the classroom often prove as influential in determining career trajectories.

Simultaneously with the implementation of The Furman Advantage, Furman has undertaken a robust assessment plan both internally and externally through its Gallup partnership. An immediate challenge with instituting new programs – whether inclusive pedagogy workshops, the Pathways initiative or the Malone Center's Paladin Career Treks – involves discerning where we are succeeding and where we must make adjustments. Indeed, the Quality Enhancement Plan, submitted as part of Furman's re-accreditation process, guarantees every student, sometime during his or her four years, one high-impact, engaged-learning experience, studying away, participating in undergraduate research or completing an internship.

Far more significant than reaching this 100 percent participation benchmark (and far more difficult, quite frankly) is ensuring the quality of such experiences – the very quality that distinguishes a Furman liberal arts and sciences education. Therein is the boldness of The Furman Advantage – its ambitious audacity. Therein lies the promise of what is next.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mary Alice Kirkpatrick** is an assistant professor in the Furman Department of English and The Furman Advantage coordinator.