A Man of Grace and Style

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A Man of Grace and Style

Remembering Ernie Harrill, a model of integrity, strength and compassion.

Thirty years ago, Furman Magazine published a lengthy feature about Ernest E. Harrill — professor of political science, Furman’s first dean of students (1962–67), and highly respected campus and community leader. The article included a story that exemplified Harrill’s way with students. Late one Saturday night while he was asleep, he was jolted out of a sound sleep by a knock on his door. Waking up, he recalled that several young men had hijacked a university canoe from the boat dock and were enjoying a cruise around the lake. Following them from shore, he eavesdropped on their conversation — during which he heard one of the miscreants say, “Wonder what Harrill would do if he could see us now?”

They found out. Harrill met them as they returned to the dock and informed them, in his friendly but firm way, of their punishment: They were to meet the next morning at Greenville’s First Baptist Church, where they would attend Sunday school and church. This was typical of how Harrill dealt with minor transgressions with gentle, low-key authority. For students facing more serious problems, he offered empathy, compassion and support. As one former student said, “You could talk to him about anything, and you get help.” A colleague added, “He’s the kind of man you want your own Dad.”

When Ernie Harrill died December 9 in Charlotte, N.C., at the age of 94, the news spread quickly among alumni — and prompted a change in me. I will always remember Dean Harrill for how he handled the situation and am grateful for it.”

For many alumni, Ernie Harrill — the epitome of grace and style — was the Furman Standard. Harrill is survived by his wife, Mary, two children, four grandchildren, and four great-grandchildren. Memorials: Harrill Scholarship Fund, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, S.C. 29613, or First Baptist Church, 847 Cleveland Street, Greenville, S.C. 29601.

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The article included a story that exemplified Harrill’s way with students. Late one Saturday night while he was down, he was taking a stroll on campus when he noticed that several young men had hijacked a university canoe from the boat dock and were joyriding a cruise around the lake. Following them from door, he eavesdropped on their conversation — during which he heard one of the miscreants say, “Wonder what Harrill would do if he could see us now?”

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When Ernie Harrill died December 9 in Charlotte, N.C., at the age of 94, the news spread quickly among alumni — and prompted many to recall the impact he had on their lives. One story came from Bob Huckabee ’67 of Seneca, S.C., who wrote, “I was a freshman at Furman when Ernie Harrill first introduced that one would think very appropriate. It had to do with a very embarrassing situation, but the results became a life-changing experience for me. I will always remember Dean Harrill for how he handled the situation and am grateful for it.”

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