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Teaching award latest feather in Turgeon's cap

GIVEN THE EVENTS of the last two years, Victoria Turgeon might well be wondering what major professional honor will come her way in 2011.

In 2009, the Furman biology professor received a Distinguished Mentor Award from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. The recognition came with \$5,000 for research supplies, a sum matched by Furman.

She followed in 2010 with the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching, which she received at last spring's Commencement. The award came with a plaque, a generous check, and a feature article in *Furman* magazine.

So if it's true that the best things come in threes, there's no telling what's awaiting her in 2011.

Michael Bingham '10, who is enrolled in optometry school at Southern College in Memphis, Tenn., says that what sets Turgeon apart as a teacher and mentor is her ability to mix classroom rigor with compassion and affability. "While she is among the most demanding instructors," Bingham says, "she is also the most caring and personable professor I have ever had. She provides a serious, challenging learning environment that is also fun, personable, even humorous."

Turgeon's abilities in the classroom carry over to the research lab. She consistently has a large number of students wanting to contribute to her work, which focuses on spinal cord injuries and neurodegenerative diseases. She says, "Most students know or know of someone who has a spinal defect, or is suffering from multiple sclerosis or ALS [amyotrophic lateral sclerosis]. They can relate to the research, and they become invested in the projects."

Turgeon, a West Virginia native who joined the Furman faculty in 1998, became the first member of her family to attend college when she enrolled at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Virginia. She recalls her wonder at discovering that her professors seemed to have the ideal life: "They taught subjects they loved, they did research in the summer, and they enjoyed what they did — and enjoyed learning new things with us."

After Randolph-Macon, Turgeon decided to pursue graduate work at Wake Forest University, where, she says, graduate students are expected to begin teaching in their second year. Once she got the opportunity — her first experience was as a teaching assistant in a lab — she realized that this was the career for her, and she let her advisor know of her interest in the profession.

She also points out that at many graduate schools, supervisors expect their teaching assistants to essentially be their full-time assistants, doing lab work, churning out data, writing papers, and supporting their efforts. At Wake, though, she was fortunate to have Walter Bo as a mentor.



JEREMY FLEMING

In Bo, Turgeon found someone who said, "I don't expect you to be me." He gave her opportunities to develop her classroom and laboratory skills, going so far as to hand her responsibility for developing six weeks worth of lectures and labs for a gross anatomy class with 130 medical students.

While rewarding, teaching medical students helped Turgeon realize that she preferred working with undergraduates. "Medical students have a very specific purpose," she says. "It's more fun to work with undergraduates. You can show them what's out there, point out things that they may not have known even existed."

At Furman, Turgeon is known for allaying introductory students' concerns about their ability to handle college science courses. Caroline Wallace '11 adds that biology majors consider Turgeon an excellent teacher "because she goes over all aspects of a topic clearly, taking the time to make sure that no one is lost. And she is frequently available in her office to answer any questions. Her 50-minute cellular biology lectures seemed to fly by. We covered a lot of material, and she always kept it fascinating."

Michael Bingham says her sense of humor often helps break the ice with students. "Hearing a professor laugh at a joke or funny story can make the relationship much less intimidating," he says. "The academic demands in her class are very stringent — tests are very thorough, and there is no slack cut on graded assignments — but you are allowed to enjoy the class and laugh along the way."

— JIM STEWART