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Ready to make Greenville, Furman home

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the devoted faculty who serve as teachers, scholars, mentors and counselors, the dedicated staff who labor conscientiously to provide the myriad services that support them in their education and well-being, the alumni, trustees and other friends of Furman who donate their money, time and energy to its service — all of this is done to create an extraordinary experience for the students in their bright college years.

And so it may well seem, I told the students, that “It’s all about you.” Yet the secret to the good life, the core value that is at the center of Furman’s mission, as I told them, “is to help you realize, deep in your hearts, that this experience is not about you.”

I also said, “The most important lesson you can learn while you are here is that for your life to have authentic meaning, fulfillment and consequence, you must learn the importance of connection to forces larger and greater than yourself: to larger causes, and to the greater community.”

Back to the beach. Of all the songs we sang, few meant more to us than an old bluegrass/gospel spiritual, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.”

Spending time at the beach as a parent, as I contemplated taking on the responsibilities of leading Furman, I realized the importance of keeping the circle unbroken. I realized that as an educator, I want for our students much the same things that, as a parent, I want for my children. I want them to grow intellectually. I want them to achieve academically. But more than anything, I want them to develop their character, their sense of the preciousness of the bonds of family and true friends, their connection to things larger than themselves, their ability to find their way on the journey to lives of consequence and meaning.

That’s how I spent my summer vacation. And that’s also, it seems to me, the moral of the story. |F|

Rod Smolla’s inauguration as the 11th president of Furman will be held Friday, October 22. More details, page 41.



JEREMY FLEMING

Ready to make Greenville, Furman home

Michele

Smolla had never seen Greenville or Furman when she drove into town in the early morning of September 27, 2008.

It was 1 a.m. She and her son, Miles Taylor, exited off Interstate 385 into downtown Greenville, took a left into the Hyatt Regency parking lot, quietly checked in, and went to bed.

Seven hours later they awoke to a crisp fall morning. After breakfast they decided to take a quick tour of downtown. Driving south on Main Street, they admired the cafes and shops, then crossed over the Reedy River into the trendy West End and saw Falls Park, the Liberty Bridge and Fluor Field.

"I was like, 'Whoa,'" says Smolla. "The colors were beautiful. The downtown was gorgeous."

Twenty minutes later, Michele and Miles arrived on campus to attend Fall for Furman, an event for prospective students. They saw the fountains, the manicured grounds and the colonial architecture — and like many who came before them, they were smitten.

"Within our first hours on campus Miles knew this was where he wanted to go," says Smolla. "He loved it. We loved it."

Having grown up in Maryland and raised her family in Richmond, Va., Smolla says she had heard about Furman through a number of alumni. "All of them were so passionate about this place," she says.

Now, "this place" has become home. In December, during a whirlwind tour and welcome, Smolla, her husband Rod, Miles and 9-year-old Dylan were introduced to the Furman community and to their new home, White Oaks.

After Rod began work in Lexington, Va., in 2007 as dean of the law school at Washington and Lee, the couple elected to maintain their Richmond home as their primary residence rather than uproot the family.

But now, after living in two places and making countless two-hour drives between Richmond and Lexington, Michele says she is glad to put down roots in Greenville and to have Rod, Miles, Corey (15) and Dylan living under the same roof. Their other two children from their blended family, Sarah and Erin (both in their early 20s), live outside the home.

Michele Smolla was raised in Eastern Shore, Md. Her father was a state policeman and her mother was a psychiatric nurse at the state mental hospital. On the after-school bus route, Michele was often dropped off at her mother's workplace.

"That was the big joke around school," she laughs. "But I grew up in that atmosphere and absolutely loved it."

The experience sparked a lifelong passion for psychology. She received her B.A. in psychology from the University of Maryland-College Park and a master's degree in social work from the University of Maryland-Baltimore. After graduate school she worked for several years with a child advocacy agency, visiting dysfunctional homes and placing children with foster parents. She left the workforce after Sarah was born.

But she continued to work with children as a volunteer, tutoring third- and fourth-grade students in Richmond City Schools through a mentoring program sponsored by her church. She has also been a volunteer at the Massey Cancer Institute.

Always athletic, Smolla grew up playing field hockey, lacrosse and rugby. Later she took up tennis and skiing until two knee injuries forced her to limit her physical activities to golf and walking.

"I tore both of my ACLs (anterior cruciate ligaments) skiing," she says. "I lost one in the Grand Tetons and the other in the Rockies."

After their two-week vacation at North Carolina's Outer Banks in mid-June, the Smollas began the process of transferring their family to White Oaks and becoming acclimated to the Upstate summers.

"Do you ever get used to your glasses fogging up?" she laughs.

The biggest challenge so far, she says, will be setting priorities. "We are moving to a community where everyone is so accepting," she says. "You want to do so many things, to meet so many people. You want to get to know everyone."

— JOHN ROBERTS

Adapted from an article in the Spring 2010 issue of Inside Furman, the university's internal newsletter.