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Wright shares mutual admiration society with students

For the Wright sisters of Redondo Beach, Calif., 2009 has been a good year.

While Amy walked off with the research professor of the year award at Florida Atlantic University in the spring, her sister Laura was awarded the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching at Furman's Commencement.

Given such stellar East Coast achievements by these West Coast transplants, chemistry students at their schools might well wish all their teachers could be "California Girls." And since the Wrights were semi-contemporaries of the Beach Boys — "They went to a nearby high school," Laura points out — the theme song would be at least semi-appropriate.

As for the sisters' choice of careers, well, that was probably inevitable. Their father was an engineer with Hughes Aircraft — his business card read "rocket scientist" — and their mother was a mathematician. "Science was oozing throughout our household," says Furman's Wright, who did her undergraduate work at California State University-Dominguez Hills.

What wasn't inevitable, though, was that she would wind up at Furman. Before she launched her job search Wright says she knew that, if she chose a career in academics, "I'd want to go where there was a strong undergraduate research program. I had started doing research my freshman year and knew how much you can learn in the lab."

One day, while sifting through a batch of college job advertisements provided by her research director at California-Riverside, where she earned her Ph.D., she happened upon a position in Furman's chemistry department. She liked its emphasis on undergraduate research, she recalls, but a line at the end

of the ad really caught her eye: "Students are a delight to work with."

"No one else said anything like that," she says. "I had to learn more."

So she applied for the position — and ultimately became the first full-time tenured woman in the Furman chemistry department, where she's been a mainstay since 1983.

Lon Knight, department chair throughout Wright's years at Furman, says of his colleague, "She amazes me with how she keeps her courses fresh with new material, and her sensitivity to student feedback allows for considerable flexibility in her teaching."

Moreover, Knight marvels at Wright's ability to work with students on any level. "I can recall many weak students in her introductory chemistry courses who would have withdrawn from the course under most instructors, but Laura spends countless hours with such students in out-of-class, one-on-one help sessions. Many of our very best senior majors owe their college chemistry achievements to Laura's early intervention.

"But while she is a tremendous help to weak students," he adds, "she still manages to challenge the best students. It's her ability to cover the broad range of students that most impresses me."

Students themselves praise Wright's warm nature, concern for their well-being and ability to apply classroom theory to real world situations. The latter skill has evolved in part from her sabbatical work with local industry, where she has observed firsthand how chemistry is used on a day-to-day basis.

Jennifer Myers '10 asserts that, aside from the professor's classroom and research skills, "What qualifies Dr. Wright for this award is her spirit. She is caring and encouraging, demands high



TOMI TAYLOR

standards and truly takes a personal interest in her students. She builds lasting relationships."

Chemistry alumni echo Myers' comments. Several wrote letters backing Wright's nomination for the award, and all described how much they valued the advice, encouragement and support she has provided since their formal Furman connection ended.

For Wright, it all comes with the territory. "That line from the advertisement was right. Our students are a joy to work with," she says. "And we have such a great mix. Some go on to medical school. Others earn doctorates and enter industry or teaching.

"It's fun to watch where they end up — and to keep up with their lives."

— JIM STEWART

An article on Savita Nair, recipient of the 2009 Award for Meritorious Advising, will appear in the winter issue.