

9-1-2009

The Furman Tree

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Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim '76, editor (2009) "The Furman Tree," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 3 , Article 34.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol52/iss3/34>

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THE LAST WORD



The Furman Tree

It stands in the middle of the median on Interstate 85 between Greenville and Atlanta. Distinctive in shape, regal in bearing and stately in its solitude, it extends its branches outward and upward.

If you're coming to Furman from Atlanta, you'll see it around mile marker 177, not far from the South Carolina border. It may even be decorated with a colorful ribbon or two. The word is — and you can test this next time you make the trek — that it marks the one-hour point (give or take a few minutes) to the university's back gate.

It's called the Furman Tree — and evidently has been for decades among the Atlanta-to-Furman crowd.

Jonathan Andersen '09 says he's known it as such since his childhood. Now at divinity school at Duke University, Jonathan blogs about it at www.jonathanandersen.com, sharing his grandmother's story of how the family would stop and tie a ribbon around the tree — sometimes purple, sometimes yellow — when bringing his mother, Beth Rogers Andersen '76, to school. The tradition, Jonathan says, continued with his generation.

His Furman Tree story captured our fancy, so we brought it up with Tom Triplitt, director of the Alumni Association and another erstwhile member of the Class of '76. Tom's a native of Columbus, Ga., so he's familiar with the I-85 route. He knew about the tree, remembered it being the topic of discussion in his college days, and pointed out that you often see a purple ribbon adorning it when Homecoming rolls around each year.

But there was more — again tied to 1976. An illustration of the tree, it was said, had been used for the section dividers in that year's *Bonhomie*. Already curious, we sought out members of the staff for confirmation. Those we located responded graciously to our out-of-left-field inquiry.

First contact: Carol Thomas Stone '76, a lawyer in Fairfax, Va. She said our story sounded right but she wasn't 100 percent certain. She suggested we check with Margaret Gaddy Morgan '76, who she said was the illustrator.

Margaret is an assistant director with the U.S. Government Accounting Office in Washington, D.C. She acknowledged that she was the artist ("Who remembered that?") but couldn't recall for sure if it was the "official" Furman Tree.

Leave it to Leslie Skipper '76, assistant yearbook editor who is an executive with Wells Fargo in Jacksonville, Fla., to settle the matter. "Yes, you have the right tree!" she said, then added, "Although I don't pass the area often, I still love seeing it when I drive to Greenville."

The Atlanta-Furman connection has always been strong. These days the university even has its own admission representative in Atlanta, Laura Brown Simmons '84. Perhaps she can encourage newbies to genuflect as they pass the Furman Tree, or stop and tie their own ribbons around its massive trunk.

Regardless, it's a nice tale of something that, while not located on the campus proper, still holds meaning for many alumni.

We encourage you to visit Jonathan Andersen's blog to read more about his connection not just to the tree, but to Furman. You can also visit www.rememberfurman.com to see the gallery of Furman photos he and Nathan Guinn '09 have compiled. Several may look familiar, as they have graced the pages (and even the cover) of this magazine.

— JIM STEWART '76, editor