

6-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim; Pollard, Joe; Shackleford, Lynne; and Yagi, Shusuke (2009) "2009 retirees made lasting contributions to departmental and university programs," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 52 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol52/iss2/19>

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2009 retirees made lasting contributions to departmental and university programs

With the retirements this spring of John Snyder, Robin Visel and Long Xu, Furman lost three faculty members who were trailblazers in their individual departments.

The retirees were granted emeritus status by the board of trustees during its spring meeting. *Furman* magazine asked three faculty colleagues to comment about the retiring professors' impact on their departments and students.

John Snyder, who joined the biology faculty in 1971, is the senior member of this year's retirees. But you wouldn't know it by looking at him.

Department chair Joe Pollard says, "Like the fictional Dorian Gray, the real John Snyder never seems to age, and his teaching and scholarship are as fresh, active and current as ever. The idea that he might be approaching retirement is almost inconceivable to those who know him, and his colleagues find it difficult to imagine what the department will be like without his calm demeanor and dry wit."

A native of Akron, Ohio, and holder of graduate degrees from the University of Michigan, Snyder focused his doctoral research on the isolation and characterization of anti-bacterial enzymes in the skin of frogs. Pollard says that, in hindsight, "This may be seen as an early manifestation of a lifelong fascination with some of nature's less glamorous creatures, which subsequently came to include fruit flies and moths, among others."

During his 38 years at Furman, Snyder taught everything from introductory courses to advanced classes in genetics and developmental biology, and he was known for his highly organized, exacting presentations. He chaired

the department from 1985-91 and was praised for his fairness, consideration of others and, of most importance to his colleagues, his ability to end department meetings on time. He has been at the forefront of developing Web-based tools to archive and retrieve images of insect specimens, and he has supervised the steady growth of Furman's insect collection.

One of Snyder's enduring legacies will be his work in developing the "Research and Analysis" class, a required course for biology majors since 1984.

"The goal," says Pollard, "is to turn students into competent researchers. [But] unlike many so-called methods courses taught elsewhere, it does not simply expose students to a variety of techniques. Instead, students design and conduct original, cutting-edge research projects within the context of an undergraduate class.

"Twenty-five years after it was introduced, the class is still challenging to teach, because it intentionally blurs the line between teaching and research. This is a perfect metaphor for John Snyder's career, in which teaching and scholarship have been integrated and complementary activities."

In retirement, John Snyder will have more time to spend with his family — wife Judy, an award-winning Greenville County teacher and administrator; their children Erin Shelor '92, Ben '95 and Phil, all college educators themselves; and three grandchildren. He plans to continue to sing in the Greenville Chorale and First Baptist Church Choir, and he'll remain active in research, pursuing his studies of the moths of South Carolina.

When Lynne Shackelford, chair of the English department, is asked about **Robin Visel**, she recalls two special gifts that were trademarks of her retiring colleague: an upbeat attitude and an adventuresome spirit.

"Whether serving as president of the Furman chapter of the American Association of University Professors, taking meticulous minutes as faculty recorder or grappling with the complexities of how best to revise the curriculum, Robin maintained an infectious positive outlook and a zest for blazing new frontiers," says Shackelford.

Visel came to Furman in 1990 as the English department's first colonialist. In that role, Shackelford says, "She helped to internationalize the curriculum for English majors, introducing them to literature from Canada, New Zealand, the Caribbean and India. She later developed a course in contemporary African fiction."

Of that course, Jeff Heinzl '09 recalls Visel's "bright enthusiasm" and noted that she "didn't let the wide variety of ideas presented in the often lengthy texts intimidate her. Rather, they invigorated her and all of us who were willing to join in the discussion."

Visel's international perspective was no doubt influenced by her years at the University of British Columbia, where she earned her graduate degrees. She has been invited to East Africa, South Asia, Europe and the Caribbean to present her scholarly work on colonial and postcolonial writers.

As a member of the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) Global Partners for East Africa initiative, Visel also helped foster collaborations between American liberal arts colleges and universities in Africa. She traveled to Kenya and Tanzania to enhance her knowledge of East African literature, and she initiated



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Retirees, left to right:
Snyder, Visel and Xu.

a faculty exchange between Furman and Rhodes University in South Africa.

Visel was influential in developing the English department's first courses in women's and gender studies, and in 1993 she was one of the key planners of the first ACS Women's and Gender Studies Conference — a conference that continues to be held every two years.

But as impressive as Visel's professional accomplishments are, Shackelford says her fondest memories are personal. "Robin and I raised our daughters together," she says, "supervising as the girls rolled down the hill during football games and laughing as Robin's youngest daughter, Georgia, dressed to the nines in gold lamé, repeatedly leaped into piles of leaves at the birthday celebration of my daughter, Laurel."

Shackelford recalls how Visel and her husband, Georgios Papatheodorou, were often generous hosts for departmental socials — and were quite talented in the kitchen.

Margaret Oakes, another departmental colleague, echoes Shackelford's comments about the Visel-Papatheodorou culinary team and adds, "I will miss the relaxed, joyous parties that they used to have at their house, with lamb on the barbecue spit and wonderful desserts, children running around the yard, and lots of good storytelling and laughter."

In 1988 Long Xu became Furman's first tenure-track professor of Chinese. It was a time, says Shusuke Yagi, Xu's longtime colleague in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, when, unlike today, few people were interested in the Chinese language — or China in general.

"While pioneering the development of Chinese language and literature courses at Furman," says Yagi, "Xu developed a study abroad program in conjunction with his alma mater, East China Normal University. Measured by the number of participants and their overwhelmingly positive responses, his program is one of the most successful in the country."

Xu also helped introduce such Chinese cultural events as the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Chinese New Year's Festival to the Furman campus, and he contributed to the growth of the university's Asian Studies program by working to establish internship opportunities in China for students.

After earning his bachelor's degree from Shanghai Teachers University, Xu taught English and Chinese in Shanghai for eight years. He completed his master's degree in American and Chinese literature at East China Normal University, then came to America to study for a Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska.

A noted translator, Xu has published many translations of modern and contemporary Chinese literature into English. His anthology *Recent Fiction from China, 1987-1988: Novellas and Short Stories* (Edwin Mellen Press) garnered

critical acclaim for illuminating how recent changes in China had been reflected in literature. He was also the editor-in-chief of the *Macmillan Dictionary for Students in Chinese*.

He is currently translating Ba Jin's *Random Thoughts*, a contemplation of the Cultural Revolution by one of China's most prominent modern writers, and *Chinese Fiction Since the 1990s*, a continuation of Xu's efforts to introduce English-language readers to contemporary Chinese literature.

The focus of Xu's work, says Yagi, has been to bridge the cultural gap between China and the United States, and many of his professional presentations emphasize how to teach Chinese language, literature and culture to English-speaking students. His influence has been felt on both sides of the Pacific, as he has led several seminars for East China Normal University professors.

Yagi says, "Xu is famous for being an enthusiastic and effective teacher who is always well-prepared. He will forever be remembered as the pioneer of Chinese language and literary education at Furman. He opened the path to today's highly successful Chinese Studies program in the Department of Asian Studies, which is now one of the best in the country among liberal arts colleges."

Compiled by Jim Stewart from reports by Joe Pollard, Lynne Shackelford and Shusuke Yagi.