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Gladly Wolfe he Lerne and Gladly Teche

Francis W. Bonner's contributions to Furman's growth and development are virtually unmatched in university annals.

No individual has done more to shape the Furman of today than Francis Wesley Bonner.

During his 38 years at Furman — and, in particular, as chief academic officer from 1961 to 1982 under presidents John L. Plyler, Gordon W. Blackwell and John E. Johns — Bonner led the university's efforts to strengthen the quality of the faculty and curriculum, desegregate the student body, develop a study abroad program, promote academic freedom and reinforce the school's commitment to the liberal arts. When he died March 16 at the age of 92 after a period of declining health, he left a legacy of accomplishment and dedication virtually unmatched in Furman history.

"He was certainly the most influential administrator I worked with," says professor emeritus John Block, who taught history at Furman from 1968 to 2005.

Bonner believed that a strong faculty is the primary determinant of a strong institution. With that in mind, he set out to recruit the best and brightest to teach at Furman. When he became academic dean in 1961 — he would eventually be named vice president and provost — 34 percent of the faculty held doctorates or other terminal degrees; when he stepped down in 1982, the figure was 86 percent.

His support for the faculty's work was a major reason he was able to attract so many talented professors. To promote a productive teaching environment, Bonner worked to reduce class loads, support faculty research, strengthen library holdings, and advocate paid sabbatical leaves to encourage professional growth and renewal.

He understood those needs because of his own experiences in the classroom. A native of Alabama and a Chaucer scholar, Bonner arrived

at Furman in 1949 after completing his doctorate at the University of North Carolina. He taught English for three years before spending the 1952-53 year at Harvard University, where he was a Ford Foundation Fellow.

Upon Bonner's return, Plyler appointed him dean of the Men's College. It was a restless time at Furman. Students were anxiously awaiting the move to the new campus, and Bonner was forced to deal with an assortment of pranks ranging from food riots and minor vandalism to a case of arson and a bomb explosion in a dormitory.

Students soon realized, however, that the dean was not to be trifled with. Although some resented his strictness or were cowed by his stern exterior — Plyler dubbed him "FBI Bonner" — most developed a grudging respect for his no-nonsense approach.

No doubt respect turned to admiration for many one night in the early 1960s, when Bonner rallied the student community and coordinated the defense of the campus against a raid from Citadel cadets.

Mark Kellogg '67 writes, "I will never forget the rather staid and slightly aloof Dr. Bonner, in shirt-sleeves and a tie, standing on the patio outside Daniel Lounge, actually leading the counter-insurgent defense of the campus when Citadel cadets attempted to paint our brand new Williamsburg brick baby blue!

"No one ever demonstrated greater concern for alma mater than did Dr. Bonner that evening. It was he who asked that cadets whom we had captured be brought to him for discipline — after we had shaved their heads and stripped them to their underwear. It was Dr. Bonner who encouraged us to shake the trees where Cherrydale stands today to ensure that no more cadets were hiding where we had dislodged so many earlier in the evening.

"And no one took more joy (except perhaps Coach Bob King) when, during the halftime performance of the Summerall Guards at Johnson-Hagood Stadium in Charleston, one guard's plumed helmet blew off in the wind to reveal a shaved head with the remnants of an 'F' tattooed with purple shoe polish."

There were other sides to the man. At Bonner's funeral, Jim Pitts, former Furman chaplain, described how, with the help of the Fellowship Class at First Baptist Church — where Bonner was a lay leader and taught Sunday school for nearly 30 years — he quietly assisted students with funds for various emergencies.

No less a public figure than Mike McConnell '66, director of national intelligence in the second Bush administration, can testify to Bonner's benevolence. In an article in the Winter 2008 *Furman* magazine, McConnell recounted his early days at Furman when he worked as a custodian for the athletic department in return for a room in the old gym. Money was tight, and he occasionally had to skip meals.

When Bonner found out, he called McConnell to his office, inquired about what he was eating, and then handed him a dining hall card — which meant three free meals a day for the rest of the year.

"I was stunned by what he did," McConnell said, adding, "I am forever grateful."

Bonner acknowledged the crowd's cheers at the 1982 Commencement after Furman awarded him an honorary Doctor of Literature degree in recognition of his "distinguished career as teacher, scholar, planner and administrator."



BLAKE PRAYTOR

Bonner's influence extended to many other areas. He planned and supervised the university's move from the downtown campus to the current site in the late 1950s, and he championed the creation of a study abroad program that today is a model for other schools. In 1973 his determined efforts, in concert with President Blackwell, helped secure for Furman a long coveted chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's most prestigious academic honorary society. And he chaired numerous accreditation committees for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, providing counsel and advice to institutions across the South.

A former high school football player and avid runner, Bonner was also faculty chair of athletics for many years. He served as president of the Southern Conference and was a vice president and member of the Division I Steering Committee of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. In 1994 he was elected to the Furman Athletic Hall of Fame.

Of his many contributions to the university, one of which he was especially proud came during the six-month period (August 1964 to February 1965) between the Plyler and Blackwell presidencies, when Bonner was chief executive officer in charge of administration.

At the time desegregation was considered a harbinger of an institution's commitment to progress, and its academic accreditation could be compromised should a school fail to desegregate. Furman and its governing body, the South

Carolina Baptist Convention, had been at odds over the issue since the university's trustees voted in October 1963 to eliminate race as a barrier to admission.

The convention asked Furman to delay the policy for a year while it studied the trustees' action, and although Furman agreed, Bonner began working behind the scenes with alumnus Sapp Funderburk to find the right student to desegregate Furman. They chose Joe Vaughn, a Greenville native.

In November 1964, however, the SCBC rejected the revised admissions policy by a margin of almost two to one. Blackwell had recently accepted Furman's offer to be president, but one condition of his acceptance was that the university would desegregate.

At a called trustees meeting on December 8, the board seemed ready to capitulate yet again to the convention's expectations — until Bonner, prepared for this possibility, stepped forward.

In *Furman University: Toward a New Identity 1925-1975*, Alfred S. Reid describes how Bonner's well-reasoned remarks "persuasively analyzed the crisis . . . and urged upon the board its moral and legal obligation to stand by its earlier decision.

"Speaking for the new president, Bonner said: 'One of the reasons [Blackwell] accepted this appointment was the prospect of having an active board of responsible and reliable trustees. Surely he will not be asked to begin his tenure in office under the shadow of doubts cast by vacillation upon the issue now facing us.'"

More than accreditation was at stake, according to Reid. "The board, Bonner said, has a transcendent duty to the students, the faculty, the administration, and the integrity of the institution. 'We entreat you to act positively and forcefully in this matter . . . Don't let us down!' Bonner's eloquence won the day."

Forty-four years later, at Bonner's funeral, Jeff Rogers, senior minister at Greenville's First Baptist Church and a former Furman professor, said, "The testimonies are innumerable of the alumni who say that they would not have made it at Furman if it had not been for Dr. Bonner. The truth be told, there are other students and faculty with other stories, stories of how they think they would have made it at Furman if it had not been for Dr. Bonner.

"The common denominator in every one of those stories is the Frank Bonner we all know who said, 'I will do what I believe is right. I don't care what people think of me.' In truth, he did care; but he cared more about doing what he believed was right than about what people thought of him."

An appropriate coda to Rogers' comments can be found in the words of Frank Bonner's beloved Chaucer: "Full wise is he that can himself know." [F]

Francis W. Bonner is survived by his wife, Nilaouise Carnes Bonner; a son, Arnold Frank Bonner '69, and his wife, Florence Black Bonner '69, of Shelby, N.C.; a daughter, Elizabeth Bonner Taylor '76, and her husband, David '77, of Charlotte, N.C.; five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. Memorials: Francis W. Bonner Scholarship, Office of Development, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Hwy., Greenville, S.C. 29613; or the Black-Bonner Scholarship, Gardner-Webb University, P.O. Box 997, Boiling Springs, N.C. 28017.