Psychology professor's planned gift recognizes influence of Furman mentors

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Melissa Guynn decided to become a psychology major at Furman before she ever took a class in the subject.

A native of Aiken, S.C., she enrolled at the university in 1987 thinking she would be a business major or pre-law student. But an encounter with a junior psychology major changed her mind.

"I remember looking through her psychology texts and finding that I was intrigued by the great variety of topics that fell under the psychology umbrella — that they were real-world topics and could be studied scientifically," says Guynn, now an associate professor of psychology at New Mexico State University. "So I decided to become a psychology major before I'd even taken a psychology class."

Her introduction to the subject couldn't have come from a better instructor: legendary Furman professor Charles L. Brewer. Guynn recalls Brewer telling one class that "we would never find better teachers than what we had at Furman. He was right. I'm trying to be as good, but I'm certainly not there yet."

Guynn, who graduated from Furman in 1991, specializes in cognitive psychology with a primary interest in human memory. She says she patterns much of her classroom work after her models in the Furman psychology department: Brewer, Gil Einstein, Elaine Nocks and John Batson.

"The four of them really were the icons of the department during my time there," she says. "They were all exceptional in every respect — their knowledge of the material, their preparation for class, their enthusiasm for their subject, their high expectations, and their enjoyment of their students and the processes of teaching and learning. "They created the impression, in and outside of the classroom, that the students were their most important concerns. Since then, I've tried to emulate their collective teaching style in all of my interactions with students."

She has also decided to recognize her mentors by establishing a planned gift at Furman that will endow several professorships in the Department of Psychology. The words of the formal agreement state that the professorships are "in appreciation for Charles L. Brewer, Gilles O. Einstein, Elaine C. Nocks and John D. Batson and their dedication to top quality undergraduate education."

Guynn's generous bequest is just one of a number of planned gifts that have been established during the early phases of the $400 million "Because Furman Matters" campaign. A donor from the Class of '56 has made a bequest of real estate, an IRA and residual cash that will ultimately endow another psychology professorship, and two members of the Class of '59 have included in their wills funding to establish a scholarship for students to use in a language-intensive study away program.

Although in years past planned giving was considered the realm of the 65-and-over demographic, Furman is now starting to benefit from a variety of deferred gifts from younger alumni and friends. For example, a 1974 graduate has endowed a football scholarship in his will, and a member of the Class of '78 has created a $1.2 million charitable trust.

As Melissa Guynn says, "My experiences at Furman were some of the most formative in my life in terms of a pretty direct influence on my educational and career choices, which in turn have influenced my life more broadly. The faculty members were all so down to earth and approachable that I could actually envision myself pursuing the same kind of career that I saw them pursuing every day. I suspect many other graduates would say they have benefited in similar, positive ways."

"So making Furman psychology a part of my estate planning seemed an appropriate thing to do — a way to say thank you to them, to help them to influence many future generations of students in the way that they influenced me, and to feel confident that the assets will be put to good use."

— JIM STEWART

Above: Melissa Guynn's mentors, clockwise from top left, Charles Brewer, Gil Einstein, John Batson, Elaine Nocks.

To learn more about planned giving options and how to meet your financial, philanthropic and estate planning goals, call Steve Perry '78, director of planned giving, at (864) 294-2458, e-mail steve.perry@furman.edu, or visit the Web, www.furman.edu/plannedgiving.