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Time passages: Retirees combined to provide 165 years of service to Furman

Furman University

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Furman's 2007-08 class of faculty retirees includes two alumni — chemistry professor Tony Arrington '60 and economics professor Richard Stanford '65 — and two language teachers, David Parsell (French) and Norman Whisnant (German).

The quartet, all of whom have been granted emeritus status, combined to teach at Furman for 165 years. Whisnant, who joined the faculty in 1964, earns the prize for the longest tenure. Parsell is the junior member of the group in terms of service, having begun his Furman career in 1969.

Furman magazine asked colleagues and former students for comments on each of these distinguished professors and scholars. Their reflections follow:

Tom Stephenson '78, James Hammons Professor of Chemistry at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, didn’t take a Tony Arrington class until his senior year, when he took two — and realized what he had been missing.

“Many people at Furman are responsible for my interest in pursuing an academic career devoted to teaching and research,” Stephenson says, “but Tony is surely at the top of the list. His combination of teaching ability, complete mastery of his material and research accomplishments make him a true teacher-scholar. This is a tricky balance, but one he always seemed to pull off with humor, compassion and an unflappable calmness.

“A successful teacher motivates and inspires students toward their own independent investigations and contributions. This description fits Tony to a T.”

Stephenson says he especially admires Arrington’s “ability to shift research interests as new targets of opportunity have arisen. For many years, his research focused on a project at Los Alamos National Laboratory. This work addressed a problem in the critically needed clean-up of leftover waste at nuclear weapons facilities and provided superb opportunities for Furman students to spend their summers working and living in New Mexico.”

In 1983, Arrington, who retires as the William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of Chemistry, delivered one of the first “What Really Matters” talks in the L.D. Johnson Lecture Series. (The text can be found under the Johnson Lecture Series link at www.furman.edu/chaplaincy.) Arrington’s lecture focused on five exemplary individuals — Francis of Assisi, Roger Williams, J.W. Gibbs, Anne Sullivan, and his father, Charles Arrington.

“The talk encompassed much of what is so admirable about Tony — his appreciation of history, love of family, fascination with science, devotion to faith and his overwhelming decency as a human being,” says Stephenson. “Furman gave much to Tony during his student years, but he has repaid those gifts many times over by enriching the lives of multiple generations of students.”

David Parsell likes to say that his Furman career was “bookended” by the university’s 3-2-3 academic calendar, which began the year he interviewed for his job and ends this year, as he retires.

William Allen, professor of French and chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, says that after Parsell’s arrival at Furman in 1969, it didn’t take long for him to become a favorite among students. Allen notes that his colleague brought to the classroom an original style and a passion for modern French literature, particularly theatre.

“Not only did he enjoy teaching it and writing about it,” Allen says, “but he was an accomplished stage actor . . . David estimates that he has played the role of Hamm in Samuel Beckett’s Endgame some 200 times, and he has also inhabited roles written by Molière and Sartre, among others.”

Parsell’s scholarly pursuits have resulted in books on American novelist Louis Auchincloss and Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode, as well as articles and critical essays on more than 30 writers. He has been an active participant in National Endowment for the Humanities seminars and has frequently served as a reader of Advanced Placement French exams for the Educational Testing Service.

“As any of Parsell’s colleagues about him,” Allen adds, “and they will invariably evoke his prodigious memory. He has long been understood by his peers to be an inexhaustible repository of facts and figures as well as of Furman institutional history and lore.”

Parsell also played a pioneering role in the development of Furman’s study abroad programs. “He led the first French immersion program to Paris in 1971,” Allen says, “and through contacts made during that first trip, the long-running Versailles program was established. David has frequently directed the program, which has been a model for many Furman programs established in the years since.”

“In a time when it seems that leadership qualities are characterized by arrogance and ignorance, Dick Stanford is the polar opposite,” says Jim Pitts, retired Furman chaplain. “He represents genuine humility and wisdom.”

Stanford, David C. Garrett Professor of Economics, has spent most of his academic career studying development economics. He
has attended seminars in India, Nepal, Pakistan, Cuba, Russia, China, Turkey and West Africa and has directed Furman study abroad programs in England and the Eastern Mediterranean, including several with Pitts.

“Dick’s enthusiasm for travel was complemented by thoughtful orientation so that participants would have a background for meaningful engagement,” Pitts says. “His mission was to move students beyond their cultural confines to a more comprehensive world view.” Pitts points out that, as both a teacher and author in “the murky world of economics,” Stanford helped to enlighten four decades of undergraduate and graduate students. “He is an expert in helping students to make connections between theory and practice, ideals and reality, technology and humanity, and his bridge-building gifts coupled campus life to the larger community.”

This has been evident, says Pitts, in Stanford’s extensive civic contributions, which have included work with the Greenville Urban League, Greenville Sister Cities International, Piedmont Economics Club and the Western South Carolina International Trade Association.

With his wife, Louise, Stanford has also been a deacon and lay leader at Greenville’s First Baptist Church. “The Stanfords demonstrate, in word and example, the importance of the life of faith undergirded by thoughtful Biblical study and meaningful service,” says Pitts. Indeed, much of Dick Stanford’s recent work has focused on the connection between economics and religion.

“Following the ordeal of removing the clutter and collection of a career housed in his modest office,” Pitts says, “I am confident that Dick will embrace his new chapter of life and leadership with enthusiasm.”

Norman Whisnant’s love for German literature and culture began in his 11th-grade world literature class in Asheville, N.C. For the last 44 years, he has shared his love for Goethe, Schiller, Heine and many others with Furman students, instilling in them an appreciation for the enormous contributions that German culture has made to Western civilization.

Spanish professor David Bost, Whisnant’s Modern Languages and Literatures colleague since 1981, says, “Norman often found himself engaged in a wide array of activities typical of our profession, such as translating and directing study away programs. He is one of Furman’s most seasoned study abroad veterans, having led (or co-led) 10 programs to sites in both Austria and Germany.

“They made it! Sharing the joy of impending retirement are, from far left, Norman Whisnant, Dick Stanford, David Parsell and Tony Arrington.”

“Norman especially excelled in accompanying his students on land tours within the countries, providing deep, engaging historical and cultural commentary at every stop along the way. Martin Luther and Ludwig van Beethoven came alive as Dr. Whisnant lectured expertly on their timeless work.”

Bost adds that Whisnant’s Furman legacy also reflects his global view of higher education. “As one of the original architects of our Language House program,” Bost says, “Norman’s vision many years ago finally became reality in 1998, the first year of this innovative educational experience.” Whisnant also chaired a special task force that studied international education at Furman and established the foundation for what has become the Office of Study Away and International Education.

Notes for his skills at translation, Whisnant is finishing a project for Harvard University Press — an English-language version of The Early Roman Historians by noted classical scholars Hans Beck and Uwe Walter. And although he is retiring from full-time teaching, he will return to Furman Hall in the fall to teach a first-year seminar on German literature in translation. Perhaps, says Bost, “Norman has come full circle, returning to the roots of his first world literature class.”