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John Beckford
Furman University

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Dan Ellis: Man with a golden heart

When I rolled into Greenville with my wife and a U-Haul truck on August 2, 1976, the first phone number I learned belonged to Dan Ellis.

No one else could have offered the kind of support that Dan provided this new 24-year-old faculty member. By our second day in town, he had found us an apartment. His sons, Keith and Barry, moved us in on the third day. The fourth day I was playing a solo at his lakeside band concert.

Three days later I was traveling with him to the Brevard Music Camp to represent Furman during College Day, and by the middle of August I found myself standing in a field next to Dan at a high school marching band rehearsal in some place called Newberry.

Before the end of the fall term, Dan had introduced me to countless area musicians, scheduled me to play or adjudicate on every weekend Furman didn't have a home football game, and helped me secure a loan so that I could buy a car.

But the thing about Dan was, he would have done the same for anyone. The world is full of people who could tell stories of Dan Ellis' generosity and desire to see others succeed.

When he died November 4 at the age of 77, hundreds of former students and colleagues lost a mentor and friend, and Furman lost one of its most colorful and popular personalities — and one of its finest ambassadors.

Dan seemed to know everyone and everyone seemed to know him — even thousands of miles from Greenville. My departmental colleague Gary Malvern tells this story from the band's trip to Bergamo, Italy, in 1985:

While walking around the city, Gary and Dan's son Keith happened upon a music store. In the window was a famous brand of trumpet for sale at an incredibly low price. Keith just had

to have it, but he ran into a snag as he tried to complete the transaction.

Eventually the clerk called the Furman band's hotel. After a stream of conversation in Italian, the clerk's face lit up. "Oh, Dan Ellis," he said. He hung up, handed the trumpet to Keith and said, "Pay me when you get back to the United States."

Dan started the Furman band program in 1958 with just 19 students. When he retired 37 years later, in June 1995, the university named the marching band practice field in his honor.

During his career, Dan earned a host of awards from regional and national professional groups, and in 1993 he was inducted into the South Carolina Music Educators Hall of Fame. As the founder (in 1968) and longtime conductor of the summer lakeside concerts, a series of free band performances held each Thursday evening beside the Furman lake, he established a tradition that has grown stronger and more popular with each passing year. It's no wonder that *The Greenville News* referred to him as "Mr. Music."

Yet it is his students who serve as his most lasting legacy. For one thing, they have their memories of band tours, which Dan organized each year. The stories that emerged from those trips are the stuff of legend.

More significantly, though, his students recall how Dan encouraged, disciplined, coaxed, inspired, comforted and cared for them. Many called him "Daddy Dan." He celebrated the



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With wife Grace at his side, Dan Ellis acknowledged the cheers at a 1994 football game when it was announced that the band practice field would be named for him.

successes of his most talented students and found ways to rescue those who needed a second chance.

Dan never took himself too seriously and was always able to laugh at his own faults. He loved his family dearly and rejoiced in the accomplishments of his talented sons, both of whom followed his lead and became college professors.

I know I will be forever grateful to the man with the golden heart. He was my lifeline when I first arrived at Furman, and he was a mentor to me and countless others who were fortunate to come under his influence.

— JOHN BECKFORD
Professor of Music

Dan Ellis is survived by his wife, Grace; sons, Keith '80 and Barry '82; daughter-in-law, Terri Turner Ellis '82; and grandchildren, Sarah and Daniel Ellis. Memorials: Dan Ellis Scholarship Fund, Furman University, 3300 Poinsett Highway, Greenville, S.C. 29613.