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Merkt new VP for business affairs

Furman University

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Nora Mullens dies at 100



Nora Emily Mullens, who taught biology at Furman from 1945 through 1971 and later served as the first full-time curator of the Furman herbarium, died September 13 in Knoxville, Tenn., at the age of 100.

Miss Mullens, whose 26 years of teaching at Furman represented the longest tenure of any woman on the university's biology faculty, was a native of LaFollette, Tenn. Holder of a bachelor's degree from the University

of Tennessee and a master's degree from Peabody College, she did additional study at Peabody, the University of Tennessee, the University of Virginia, the Duke University Marine Biological Station and the University of North Carolina. Before joining the Furman faculty, she taught at Sue Bennett Junior College in Kentucky and at Averett Junior College in Virginia.

Rex Kerstetter, professor emeritus of biology, says many Furman alumni would have taken Miss Mullens' classes in introductory zoology and biology for non-science majors. "She was a delightful colleague, very professional, thorough and conscientious," he says. "She was extremely trustworthy and helpful, the kind of person a student could talk with easily. And she had a wonderful sense of humor."

After her retirement from teaching, Miss Mullens worked for several years in the department's herbarium, identifying, mounting and recording plant specimens.

Each year the biology department presents the Nora Mullens Biology Award to the most outstanding student taking his or her first biology course in the freshman year.

Merkt new VP for business affairs



Mary Lou Merkt, chief financial officer at Sweet Briar College in Virginia since 1996, arrived on campus in October as Furman's vice president for business affairs. She succeeds Wendy Libby, who left Furman during the summer to become president of Stephens College in Missouri.

At Sweet Briar Merkt served as vice president for finance and administration, with responsibility for seven divisions at the college.

During her tenure, she coordinated the development of the institution's first facilities master plan and oversaw construction and renovation projects totaling \$26 million.

Before joining the administration at Sweet Briar, Merkt spent 11 years in the business office at Radford University in Virginia. A certified public accountant, she served as director of internal audit (1985-91), director of financial services (1991-94) and assistant vice president for finance (1991-96) at Radford.

Before entering higher education, Merkt worked as a public accountant in Virginia. She holds both a bachelor's degree in accounting and an M.B.A. degree from Radford.

Meritorious professors: Th

Blaker guides students on journey through the mind



College professors often decide to pursue their craft because of the inspiration of a mentor. But in Furman biology professor **William Blaker's** case, a bit of self-motivation led him to the lectern.

During his first year in graduate school, Blaker was required to make a 40-minute presentation about lipids in cell membranes. Walking to a small stage, Blaker, then 21, looked at his audience, consisting of about 40 professors and students, and felt his stomach tighten and heart rate quicken.

"I just knew I was going to crash and burn," says Blaker. But after taking a deep breath, he began. And as his talk progressed, so did his confidence.

To his surprise, he discovered that he actually enjoyed the experience. Afterward, several professors commended his presentation.

"I was well versed and confident. I felt I did well," says Blaker, a winner of the 2002-03 **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching**. "I knew then that I wanted to teach."

After earning a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri and completing postdoctoral research at the University of North Carolina, Blaker moved to the Washington, D.C., area and did research for four years at the National Institute of Mental Health. In 1984 he began teaching in the veterinary school at Virginia Tech, where he remained until coming to Furman in 1990.

Blaker, whose specialties are neuroscience and the brain, is considered a demanding taskmaster — and a classroom joker. But studying the brain, the most complex human organ, can be so baffling that, as he says, "You have to throw a joke in there once in a while to lighten it up."

He adds, "Most good teachers have a bit of showmanship in them. Often, teaching is about 50 percent performing. At higher levels the students are teaching themselves and you are motivating them like a coach. It's like, 'Let's go out there this half, team, and really hit the books'."

Blaker's students say that he makes learning both fun and practical. "Dr. Blaker is witty and light-hearted," says a student who nominated him for the teaching award. "His tests specifically uphold Furman's motto of engaged learning by rewarding those students who are able to not only duplicate but to also apply the science that has been taught in the lectures."

Many biology majors plan to be physicians, and Blaker says that they must be able to apply knowledge and think quickly on their feet. "Certainly, you need to know some formulas," he says. "But memorizing alone will not cut it in the real world. My tests are not all multiple choice. They include real world problems."

Blaker frequently incorporates different disciplinary concepts into his lectures. In his course on the brain, for example, students study the topic from philosophical, psychological and biological perspectives.

"Oftentimes the sciences are isolated over here [in Plyler Hall], both physically and intellectually," he says. "The great thing about studying the brain and mind is that everyone has something to say about them."

— John Roberts