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Meritorious professors: Three teachers earn top honors for 2002-03: Blaker guides students on journey through the mind

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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

See teachers earn top honors for 2002-03

Lessons in living: Fuller's students see big picture

As **Trudy Fuller** was leaving for Furman's Commencement last May, her husband, Ronald, stopped her before she headed out the door.

"You're going to wear *those* shoes?" he asked, somewhat incredulously.

Trudy looked down, shrugged, then reminded him that graduation takes a while. "I want to be comfortable," she said.

So despite Ronald's subtle effort to dress her up for the occasion — he knew what was coming — that's how music professor Trudy Hines Fuller came to be wearing sensible shoes when she was called to accept the 2002-03 **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching**.

Given her background, you could expect such practical thinking from Trudy Fuller, who comes from solid, small-town Midwestern stock. Born in Sidney, Neb., she and her siblings (a brother and two sisters) were raised on a farm. She studied piano from an early age and later played the flute and saxophone in the high school band. She sang, too, but as she says, "There were no vocal teachers, and I just thought everybody sang."

For Fuller, formal vocal training began at the University of Northern Colorado, where she earned both bachelor's and master's degrees and discovered the joys of performing. The talented mezzo-soprano would go on to perform with a host of opera companies and symphony orchestras, while teaching at several colleges. After completing her doctorate at the University of Arizona in 1983, she came to Furman, where she has struck a comfortable balance between performing and teaching.

The knowledge she gleaned from her years of stage and concert experience has certainly paid off for her Furman students, many of whom have moved on to top graduate programs. Senior Craig Price says, "My lessons each week are something that I cherish, because not only do I learn something about singing, I learn something about myself — and about life."

Elizabeth Bishop '89 confirms Price's assessment. Says Bishop, a mezzo-soprano of growing renown who has sung with many major opera companies, "Some of the most important things Trudy taught me were not about singing.

"When you are told by your most important teacher that singing is sometimes not the most important thing you are doing, you learn perspective. When the person who knows your voice best tells you that you will have to wait years to know what your 'sound' will be, you learn patience. When you make an idiot of yourself in front of a person you trust and can laugh about it with her, you learn the value of humor.

"Most importantly, when you see a woman who certainly has the talent and intelligence to make a good career in the business redirect everything for one little boy, you learn not to confuse your job with your life." (Fuller's son, William, is now a businessman in New York, where he lives with his wife and son.)

Adds Bishop, "Everything Trudy taught me about singing was wonderful and right on the money, but everything else she taught me was just as valuable."

— Jim Stewart



With Cloer's help, students discover the strength within

When you walk into **Tom Cloer's** office, the first thing that catches your eye is an old poster of *The Wizard of Oz* depicting photos of Dorothy, the Tin Man, Lion and Scarecrow.

"You see that picture?" says Cloer, pointing to the framed poster. "That's pretty much what I'm all about."

In an Appalachian twang that has not been dulled by his 29 years in higher education, Cloer explains how the wizard used trickery and a dash of deception to help the foursome realize they already possessed the very traits they so desperately sought.

"Each of them had it in them," says the education professor. "They just didn't know it. It took the wizard to get it out of them. I try to point out strengths to students that they did not know they had."

Cloer, recipient of the 2002-03 **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising** (he won the teaching award in 1988), has been working his wizardry on Furman students since 1974. As director of the Academic Assistance Program, he often counsels students who are struggling academically or having trouble adapting to college life.

He begins by listening, probing for potential instead of pitfalls and making his charges feel good about themselves and about the university community. Only then, he says, can they learn and grow.

An opponent of standardized testing and a critic of cookie-cutter approaches to education, Cloer says that each student learns differently. When possible, he says, teaching techniques should be tailored to each pupil.

"As teachers and advisors, we have to help students see themselves as valuable and capable, and then responsible," says Cloer.

Says a student who nominated him for the award, "I met Dr. Cloer when I was just a freshman and trying to adjust from high school. He turned me from a C/D student my first semester to a dean's list student the next semester. Whenever I feel bad or do poorly on a test, he boosts my confidence and tells me that I should not worry. In such a competitive school as this, you need to hear that sometimes."

Cloer, who grew up on Stinking Creek in a rural, mountainous sawmill village in eastern Tennessee, is a living testimony to the positive influence that a teacher can have on a young life.

When he was 15, Cloer was expelled from school for growing a beard. He was working as a guide on Lake Norris when one of his former teachers, Mrs. McGhee, saw him loitering at a country store. She scolded him for not being in school and told him that he had enough promise to attend college.

"That was the first time anyone had even mentioned college to me," says Cloer, who holds degrees from Cumberland College, Clemson and the University of South Carolina. "Most people thought I would be a dust doodler [someone who works in a sawmill], but she saw potential."

Now, 43 years later, Cloer, like the Wizard of Oz, is using his own tricks to help students see and then realize their own potential. Furman is his Emerald City.

— John Roberts

