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Meritorious professors: Teaching, Advising award recipients for 2002: Tessitore makes political philosophy accessible, intriguing

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Meritorious professors: Teaching, Advising

Tessitore makes political philosophy accessible, intriguing

Ask most outstanding professors why they chose a career in higher education and you're likely to get the same response: A teacher inspired them.



Aristide (Ty) Tessitore of

Furman's political science department says he had two such mentors during his undergraduate days at Assumption College: philosophy professor Ernest Fortin and language professor Denys Gonthier.

Tessitore, a recipient of the 2002 **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching**, says, "Fortin could speak about complex matters with remarkable clarity and humor. Gonthier was something of a mystic who excelled outside the classroom. He often invited students for walks and hikes. I strive for the clarity of Ernest and the availability of Denys."

Both men were also Catholic priests — and further inspired Tessitore to follow in their footsteps. He became a priest in 1982.

Tessitore, who holds a Master of Divinity degree from Weston School of Theology in Boston and a Ph.D. in political science from Boston College, returned to his alma mater to teach in 1984. And his star seemed to be on the rise at Assumption when his life took a different turn: he decided to leave the priesthood.

He realized, he says, that remaining a priest would have eventually taken him away from teaching, which was his passion. And Tessitore adds that the priesthood would ultimately have been unhealthy for him. "I continue to hold the priesthood in high regard," he says. "Leaving was like going through a divorce. It was very painful, but I have no regrets."

With the watershed decision behind him, he began looking for a fresh start. He joined the Furman faculty in 1992 and quickly became known as a meticulous lecturer, effective communicator and good listener. In his first year, he won the award for teaching excellence from the Association of Furman Students.

Students say he has a knack for making the writings of Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Locke and de Tocqueville come alive. "His primary concern is not passing a test, but to digest, understand and apply the material," says a student who nominated him for the teaching award. "Political thought does not remain at arm's length."

Tessitore says, "Students often come in with fear and trembling, but they soon discover that this is interesting stuff. These authors cause them to think about their beliefs. Political philosophy invites you to examine the fundamental principles upon which you base your life. It is both intimidating and liberating."

But making a class in ancient political thought exciting to a 19-year-old isn't easy, and students happening by Tessitore's office often see him pacing or reading aloud at a lectern. They believe he's practicing his lectures.

He finds humor in this false assumption. "I have a bad back, so I sometimes write standing up," he says. "When tired, I do pace and read out loud. It helps me stay awake."

Tessitore is spending this academic year in Indianapolis, Ind., as a scholar-in-residence at the Liberty Fund, a private educational foundation. He will return to Furman in August.

— John Roberts

In Henderson, students discover reliable sounding board

In **Scott Henderson's** gleaming new office in Herman N. Hipp Hall sits a piece of wood, two feet in length, sanded and smooth with a glossy finish. Meticulously burned into the wood are the letters "H-e-n-d-e-r-s-o-n".



It stands out like a rusty old pick-up in a sea of BMW Roadsters.

The story behind it: When Henderson was a first-year history teacher at an impoverished junior high school in eastern Virginia, he had no classroom. Instead, he traveled from room to room each period, pushing a metal cart that contained everything he would need for class, from textbooks and papers to office supplies.

As he struggled to teach under these circumstances, Henderson often wondered if his students were listening, much less learning.

During the final week of class, John Nixon, a shy seventh-grader, approached Henderson in the hall and handed him the piece of wood. "He said, 'This is a license plate for your cart,'" says Henderson. "It was the result of a nine-week-long shop project."

Henderson suddenly realized that he had made a difference, at least in one boy's life. And today, 16 years later, the student's gift sits on the windowsill in Henderson's office, serving as a daily reminder of the impact a teacher can have.

"I can't witness any more than that wood can," says Henderson, an assistant professor of education and a recipient of the 2002 **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising**.

Known for his boundless energy and sympathetic ear, Henderson works with Furman students from many different disciplines. Some are struggling to choose a major. Others are having academic or personal problems. In Henderson, they find a reliable sounding board.

"I spend a lot of time listening. I think everyone should take a course on listening," he says. "Everyone has a story, and you need to know what that story is before you can give out any advice."

Through listening and asking the right questions, Henderson helps students find their own answers. Says one student who nominated Henderson for the advising award, "I'm rarely comfortable showing weakness and sadness, but I was comfortable in Dr. Henderson's office because my stresses and worries were never annoyances. He cared and always offered encouraging words. His advice was never cliché, run-of-the-mill or elusive, but warm, intelligent and useful. I always left his office with a lighter step than when I entered."

As the coordinator of secondary education at Furman, Henderson supervises Furman's teaching interns at local middle and high schools. A Truman Scholar during his undergraduate days at Florida State, he also spends many hours assisting students applying for the Truman and other national scholarships.

In addition, Henderson has published two books in the last two years — a biography of urban planner and civil rights activist Charles Abrams, and the memoirs (which Henderson edited) of Joseph C. Swidler, a New Deal reformer and public servant who helped shape the nation's energy policy.

— John Roberts