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Meritorious professors: Teaching, Advising award recipients for 2002: Oakes stands out for commitment to students' needs

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ng award recipients for 2002

Oakes stands out for commitment to students' needs



The scene: Paladin Stadium. The event: Commencement 2002.

As the proceedings began, **Margaret Oakes**, assistant professor of English, was lamenting the close of another school year.

"Graduation always seems to be such a letdown," she says, recounting her conversation with a colleague. "You may or may not see your seniors one last time, and everyone disperses at the end of the ceremony, including the faculty. I always feel a bit depleted and depressed at the end of the year."

Moments later, though, Oakes' mood altered considerably when Dean A. V. Huff, Jr., called her to the platform to accept the **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising**. "Suddenly," she says, "the evening wasn't such a letdown anymore."

The honor validated a decision Oakes made more than a decade ago when, after four years as a securities lawyer in Chicago, she resigned from her firm and enrolled in the English Ph.D. program at Stanford University. After studying and teaching at Stanford for six years, the Renaissance scholar joined the Furman English department in 1996 — and quickly drew raves from students for her listening skills, cheerful personality, caring nature and ability to guide them through the Furman academic system.

Senior Erin Matthews says, "She is an encourager, a friend and an inspiration. All of her advisees adore her and walk out of her office encouraged and ready to tackle whatever obstacles life holds for them."

For Oakes, advising is, quite simply, fun. "I enjoy getting to know students outside of class," she says. "Some want to talk all the time; some might never stop by; others will come in when they feel the need. You just read their needs and go from there."

An alumna of the University of Illinois, which has an undergraduate enrollment of close to 30,000, Oakes admits to going through a bout of culture shock when she arrived at Furman, with 2,600 students. But her adjustment period turned out to be brief, and she has become a role model for Furman's personal approach to academic advising.

And while her goal is to help students learn to make their own decisions, she's not above offering pointed advice when necessary.

"I don't mind telling someone, 'Grad school wouldn't work for you'," she says. "Other times I hand them tissues and let them talk. I'll even get mad sometimes. But you can't 'not deal' with them. The key is that you're prepared to handle anything, and that you don't get embarrassed or flustered."

Judging from the large number of students requesting Oakes as an advisor, she knows what she's doing. As senior Emily Ball says, "My relationship with Dr. Oakes has become one of the most positive aspects of my Furman experience. She has been invaluable in helping me assimilate into life at Furman and has encouraged me to think about my future. Without telling me what to think, she has challenged me to make wise choices . . . She is the paradigm example of an advisor, a professor and a friend."

— Jim Stewart

Passion, forthrightness hallmarks of Julian's classroom style



Once the cheers had died down after the announcement that English professor **Linda Julian** was a winner of the 2002 **Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching**, the almost universal

question seemed to be: What took Furman so long?

In her 22 years at Furman, Julian has earned widespread admiration on campus for her breadth of knowledge, classroom skills, patience and support for students. Although she is considered a demanding instructor, students clamor for spots in her classes because of her dedication to teaching and her passion for composition and literature, especially that of the Victorian era.

Her classes feed off her energy when she tells them to "Put up your feet and enjoy this great stuff," or "Your homework is to curl up with a good book and read for hours. What greater pleasure is there in the world?" And to this day, when Charles Dickens' name is mentioned, Julian disciples are likely to respond with the professor's oft-repeated mantra: "Dickens is the greatest writer that ever lived."

Julian, who holds a bachelor's degree (in German) and master's (in English) from Clemson University and a doctorate from Boston University, came to Furman on a part-time basis in 1980, about the time *Workbook for Writers*, a book she co-authored, was published. Soon, she was awarded a full-time contract.

Furman students have reaped the benefits of her talents ever since. In particular, she seems to have an affinity for first-year composition students. "All of them come in terrified," Julian says, "so I just try to lead them along without pushing them over the edge. And it's great fun to see how their writing improves. I enjoy teaching freshman composition more than anything else."

Because of her journalism background — she wrote and edited for *The Greenville News* before and during her college days — Julian was a natural to advise *The Paladin*, the student newspaper, which she did for many years before stepping down last spring. Former editor Stacy Schorr '99, a journalist in Washington, D.C., says that lessons learned under Julian apply both within and beyond the classroom walls: "She is a teacher not only of theory and ideals, but of practical application and real-world skills."

Students also appreciate her honesty and forthrightness. Julian has struggled with her health in recent years, and she missed fall term this year because of a recurrence of a rare cancer. Says Danielle Logan '02, another former *Paladin* editor, "She was very open about her problems, but she never allowed her illnesses to interfere with her teaching. She is constantly upbeat and cheerful."

Julian, who expects to return to the classroom winter term, says, "I don't think anyone should be reluctant to let students know what's going on in their lives. For one thing, it might encourage someone else to go for treatment. I think truth is the best policy, and besides, I felt I needed to give some explanation as to why I might not be at my best."

The general consensus, though, is that Linda Julian is one professor who is always at her best.

— Jim Stewart