Ruminations on alma mater

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Ruminations on alma mater

By Lige Hicks

Lige Hicks ’41 was presented the Bell Tower Award in April in recognition of his business and civic achievements and of his service to alma mater. Next to an honorary degree, the Bell Tower Award is the most prestigious honor bestowed by Furman.

A former executive with the DuPont Company, from which he retired in 1981 as director of international development and operations, Hicks and his wife, Joi, are generous supporters of the university. A staunch friend of the chemistry department, he was inducted into the Furman chapter of Phi Beta Kappa as an alumnus member in 1996. As head agent for the Class of ’41, he led the way when the class became the first to achieve 100 percent participation in the Furman Fund.

He offers the following commentary on his long association with alma mater.

At its Founders Day Convocation on April 17, Furman presented me with the Bell Tower Award. Although Furman had recognized me with everything except the President’s Chair, including an honorary doctorate in 1976 and the Alumni Service Award in 1985, the Bell Tower Award was one thing I never expected to receive.

The surprise and pleasure I felt upon reading President David Shi’s letter advising me of the award resulted in very damp eyes. It caused me to reflect on Furman’s 175 years and on my association with the university. Three unrelated items began to roll around in my mind.

The Commemorative Pen
In connection with the 175th anniversary celebration in 2001-02, alumni received from Furman a brief questionnaire asking us to describe our association with the university. One question asked, “What did attending Furman mean to you?” Like many others, I sent in my answer and forgot about it.

Several months later I received a fountain pen commemorating the 175th anniversary. Imagine my surprise at finding on the pen the quotation, “Simply put, Furman changed my life.” The quote was part of my response to the questionnaire.

This really caused me to think back to 1937 when, as a senior at Florence (S.C.) High School, I had decided on my plans for college. I would enter Georgia Tech, become a chemical engineer, and go to work for DuPont.

My father, a 1912 Furman graduate and a successful physician, suggested that I consider an alternative that would have me become a chemical engineer, but with something more than the average graduate. He proposed that I enroll for two years in a liberal arts college for added breadth of background, then transfer to Georgia Tech for my chemical engineering degree.

In the fall of 1939, John R. Sampey, head of the chemistry department, asked me to join him in a joint research project. I accepted, and went on to graduate from Furman in 1941 with a major in chemistry. Graduate school at Princeton followed, with a Ph.D. in organic chemical synthesis in 1944.

And then I went to work for DuPont, but with a background and perspective far different from my original plans.

Furman Presidents
During its 175th anniversary celebration, Furman highlighted the accomplishments of its 10 outstanding presidents. It has been my unusual pleasure to have known and been rather closely associated with five of these men: Bennette E. Geer, John Plyler, Gordon Blackwell, John Johns and David Shi.

Guess it shows that if you live long enough and stay involved, you get to enjoy really unusual benefits.

Coincidence or Omen?
About four years ago, my wife of 58 years, Joi, using a photograph from the old campus, painted a watercolor of the Bell Tower at Old Main on the downtown campus. Last year, as we planned our trip to Greenville for the 60th reunion of the Class of ’41, she decided that she would secretly make me a Furman tie clasp using the painting.

Using laser color printer technology, she reduced the 8” x 10” picture to a bit more than 1/2” x 1/2”. This tiny tower fit on a ceramic piece she had formed and cured. Next, she coated the picture and ceramic piece with clear acrylic. Then she mounted the finished product on a tie bar.

I wore the Bell Tower tie clasp with great pride at my reunion last October. And at the Founders Week Convocation April 17, just six months later, I wore the same tie clasp with even greater pride.

Yet the question still remains regarding Joi’s creation: Was it coincidence or was it omen?