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'Real World,' Furman style

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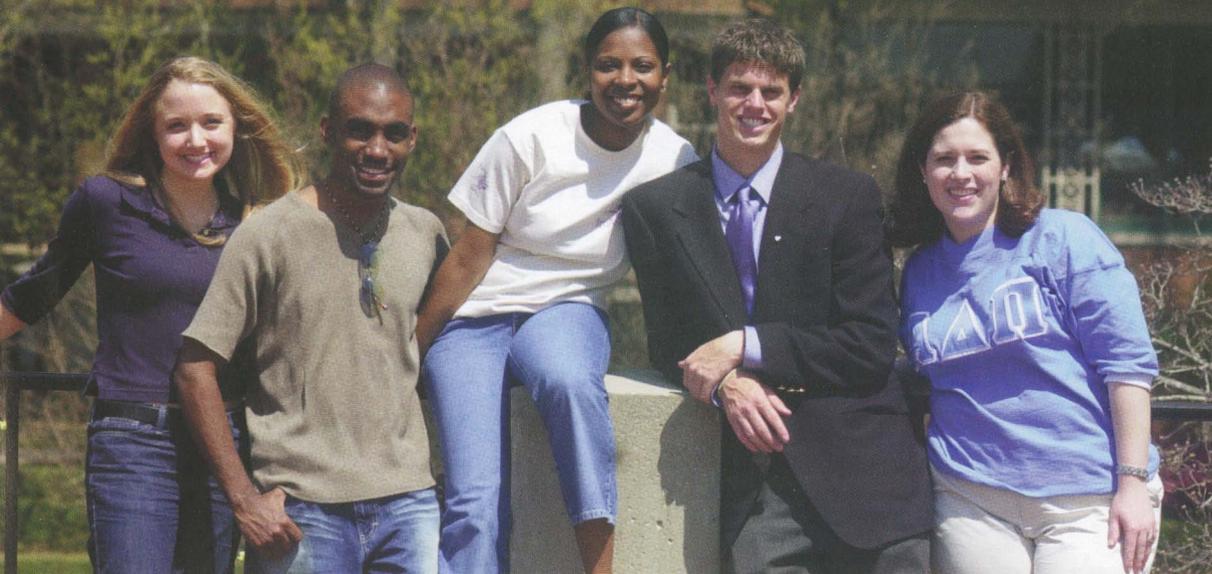
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'Real World,' Furman style



From left, Emily, David, Shunta, Matt and Laura Beth, live and in person. Mike (without the cap!), apparently busy with a journal entry, forgot the photo shoot but stopped by later.

This is the true story of six strangers:

- Picked to attend Furman;
- Go to classes;
- Live on campus;
- Record their lives;
- And inform prospective students

about what happens when people stop being high schoolers and start being collegians.

Yes, it's "Real World," Furman style, only without the excessive self-absorption, silly squabbles and juxtaposed editing you see on the MTV show.

Where can you find it? Just go to engagefurman.com, the Admissions Web site launched this year with the help of Stamats Communications of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Click on the First-Year Journals link and you'll meet the six students chosen from 40 applicants to be Furman's initial class of on-line "journalists."

Their task: to describe what life is like for a new Paladin. Their tools: a digital camera and a keyboard. Their reward: the camera, plus free books for a year.

There's Emily M., who seems to find adventure at every turn; Laura Beth G., the upbeat hometown girl; Shunta H. (pronounced Shun-TAY), ever bubbly and enthusiastic; David F., the international student (from Jamaica); Matt G., the track/athletic representative; and Mike O., diligent recorder of campus events who's almost never seen without his cap.

Every week or three, depending on their schedules and/or inclination, they offer unabridged and unedited perspectives on life at Furman (which explains the occasional typo), posting their entries directly to the Web without any administrative oversight.

No oversight, you say? No controls?

Well, Furman could always kick their entry off after it's posted — and end the free books — if someone decides to be naughty. But the students see their job

as both honor and opportunity. They appreciate the freedom Furman gives them and use it responsibly, and their takes on college life offer a freshness and immediacy that a canned university publication can't hope to match.

While most of the entries highlight the fun stuff — social outings, special events, road trips — they also reflect the thorny side of college life. Like studying. And tests. And illness. And parking tickets.

"I want to be honest," says Emily, who is from Cincinnati. "It's not just an ad for Furman. If I don't agree with something, I'll say so; I won't lie." Mike, a resident of Cary, N.C., agrees and says, "I don't want to make it all appear to be cookies and milk. It's OK to gripe about workload. It's important to keep it up to date, because that's part of the commitment, but it's also vital to be honest and open, because you absolutely don't want to be a 'tool' for the university."

Adds Shunta, who lives near Atlanta, Ga., "I think it's fun to let prospectives see what typical Furman students are doing. It's not packaged. People would question us if all we talked about was how wonderful everything is. It's OK to discuss tests or workload, because that's all part of the experience."

The students' efforts have helped to make engagefurman.com the most popular section of the Furman Web. During the last week in March, for example, engagefurman.com received 7,200 visitors, and the on-line journals were the most visited area of the site. From September 1, 2001, when it debuted, to March 1, engagefurman.com handled 151,425 user sessions, an average of over 25,000 a month. Approximately 30 percent of those visitors stopped by more than once a week.

Not surprisingly, given their prominence on the Web, the journalists have

become somewhat famous. Shunta struck up a correspondence with one prospective student who contacted her because she enjoyed the journals so much. The student eventually visited Shunta for a weekend and wound up being featured on-line. (She's coming to Furman.)

Shortly after Emily wrote about spraining her ankle, a parent visiting campus for Parents Weekend introduced himself and inquired how she was feeling. And then there was the conversation she had with another freshman who described the following exchange with his father:

Student: "Dad, I got a 3.0 first term."

Dad: "Why didn't you do better?"

Student: "Dad, it's Furman. It's hard. A 3.0 is good."

Dad: "I read Emily's journal. She got a 3.9."

Clearly, prospective students aren't the only people checking in on a regular basis. The journalists say they hear from friends, relatives and even former teachers back home. As Mike points out, "My family enjoys keeping tabs on me and seeing what's going on. They'll miss it when the year ends, especially the photographs."

Indeed, the time has come for our on-line diarists to say goodbye to their faithful readers and move on to the sophomore phase of their Furman lives. They'll still be around, though, to advise the new, yet-to-be-determined crop of six freshmen who will assume on-line duties in the fall. Shunta says, "I'm looking forward to seeing what those who are chosen for next year can do with the site."

They'll have a hard act to follow.

— Jim Stewart

Each journalist's entries for the 2001-2002 year are archived on the First-Year Journals section of engagefurman.com.