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Five professors complete their Furman careers: Biology department retirees leave rich, lasting legacy

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Biology department retirees leave rich, lasting legacy

In any field, there is at least one “Golden Age” full of great progress and excitement. The three members of Furman’s biology department who chose to retire this year have had the joy of being part of such a period. All three began their careers in the 1960s, just as the molecular biology revolution was developing a full head of steam. All three have participated in the excitement, as researchers and as mentors of students who entered the field in various capacities.

The first to join Furman’s faculty was **Gilbert Fairbanks**, who migrated to the University of South Carolina from Connecticut. In 1964, he brought his expertise on the lipids of cell membranes to Furman. Over the years, he has taught several varieties of physiology courses as well as introductory courses.

Twenty-five years ago, Gil took on the huge task of being Furman’s chief advisor for students intending to enter the health fields. Since then, he has been an encourager, a goad, and sometimes a parent surrogate to hundreds of students. He also built the Furman chapter of Alpha Epsilon Delta, the health fields honorary society, into one of the most active in the country, as evidenced by its many awards. In recognition of his monumentally successful work with students, he was named a winner of this year’s Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Advising.

Gil has also been active in off-campus programs advancing the study of science. A former editor of the *Bulletin of the South Carolina Academy of Science*, he was president of that organization in 1978 and 1979. But his greatest service to science in this state was as the director of the South Carolina Western Regional Science Fair from 1973 until 1998. In that capacity, he coordinated the annual gathering of hundreds of middle and high school students. In recognition of these services, he was presented the Order of the Palmetto, the highest award that our state’s government can confer to its citizens.

Gil is a staunch supporter of his Lutheran church, where he is active in the music program and in teaching confirmation classes. Soon, he will have more time for pursuing his hobby of woodworking, visiting his new grandchild and perhaps traveling with his wife, Brenda, to his favorite vacation destination, Disney World.

As **Lewis Stratton** was finishing his doctoral work at Florida State, he had every intention of heading into industry as a biochemist. But a recruiting visit by Dean Francis Bonner changed his mind, and he arrived at Furman in the summer of 1967. Since then, his expertise in hemoglobin structure has led to many published papers and a patent or two. He pushed hard to make the biology department one of Furman’s most active in offering summer research experiences for its students, both on and off campus. Two of his sabbatical leaves led to opportunities for dozens of students at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the Naval Research Laboratory.

Lew has taught many courses, but his favorites are microbiology, molecular and cellular physiology, and his recent incarnation, molecular and metabolic biology. Hundreds of alumni will remember him for the infamous multi-page charts of metabolic reactions that they had to memorize. In a quite different realm, Lew was the first Furman professor to take students to the Galapagos Islands, an experience that has since become a favorite for biology majors.

In 1991 Lew became department chair, a position he held until his retirement. Under his skillful administration, the department underwent significant course reorganization, hired several new faculty members, and increased its student population almost to the breaking point.

Lew’s community involvement has centered on being a volunteer for the local fire department. He will long be remembered for



As researchers and mentors, Lew Stratton, Rex Kerstetter and Gil Fairbanks (left to right) combined to provide 100 years of service to their department and the university.

headlong dashes out of classrooms as his beeper called him to emergency duty. He also served as a fire commissioner, his only brush with politics.

Having been a farm boy in Pennsylvania, Lew has great skill as a handyman and actually built (with help from his father and some commandeered students) a log house, where he lives with wife Helen and two step-sons, on several acres of land lovingly called “The Swamp.” Undoubtedly, much of his retirement time will be used in the continuing development of this haven. And he has detailed plans for the next hunting expeditions and visits with two daughters.

Rex Kerstetter was finishing his doctorate in plant physiology at Florida State during the same year that Lew found Furman. He too was interviewed during that productive trip to FSU by Francis Bonner and came to the newly completed Plyler Hall in the fall of 1967.

Over the years, his expertise in both molecular biology and the more classical aspects of botany has allowed him to teach a wide range of courses, from botany and ecology to plant physiology and microbiology. His early stint as a high school biology teacher made him a natural for a course on teaching methods and as an advisor to students preparing to be teachers.

Rex has been highly productive in his research, as evidenced by an impressive list of published papers and abstracts, most of them with students as co-authors. Nearly every summer he has advised one or more students in their independent research projects, and his contacts within the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have helped a number of students to acquire summer research positions at that world-class facility. His current work on the Paris Mountain watershed project combines his interests in microbiology and ecology.

Rex’s Kansas farm background led to an early appreciation of plants. He has constantly reminded us of their value and the need to keep teaching about plant taxonomy and ecology, as well as the molecular aspects of botany. He will carry his love of plants into his retirement as he develops a facility in his home for cultivating exotic orchids. And undoubtedly he will continue to offer landscaping tips to his two sons, both of whom also answer to the name “Dr. Kerstetter.”

The biology department will be a poorer place in the near future, as these valued colleagues move on. They brought the “new biology” with them as they began their careers and had the satisfaction of helping the department catch the rising crest. Their legacy in the department and among the thousands of students they have taught will be rich and long lasting.

— **John Snyder**
Professor of Biology