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## My Debut with Burt

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Macy Whitener '13, playing the role of an airline ticket agent in "The Last Movie Star," greets college football legend Vic Edwards, played by the late Burt Reynolds.

**M**acy Whitener '13 never dreamed of making a silver screen debut. And appearing in a role with acting legend Burt Reynolds was even further from her imagination. All that changed when "The Last Movie Star" writer and director Adam Rifkin suggested Whitener audition for a part. Whitener, who at the time worked for an advertising agency in Knoxville, Tennessee, took Rifkin up on the idea. A few days later, she got the call. "I was floored," said Whitener, who secretly read for the part without telling her family.

## My Debut with Burt

*Macy Whitener '13 makes acting debut with Burt Reynolds*

BY TINA UNDERWOOD

It's a fleeting 12-second exchange in the movie, and all told, the bit, including hair, makeup, costume and the speaking part itself, took four hours to wrap. But Whitener wouldn't trade the experience for anything. "It was the most fun I had in 2016," she says.

In the movie, which opened in theaters last March, Burt Reynolds plays Vic Edwards, a college football legend-turned stunt double-turned leading man. The film follows Edwards, who grudgingly accepts an invitation to receive a Life-

time Achievement award at a small-time film festival in Nashville. On the way, he runs into an airline ticket agent played by Whitener. Ariel Winter from the Emmy-winning hit series "Modern Family" plays the tattooed and pierced costar Lil McDougal. Chevy Chase appears in the film as Vic's friend Sonny.

Reynolds, who died in September, is probably best known for his rough-and-tumble role as Bandit in the '70s and '80s "Smokey and the Bandit" hit movies with Sally Field, Jackie Gleason and Jerry Reed. He is perhaps better remembered for his portrayal of Lewis in the



**“IT WAS THE MOST FUN  
I HAD IN 2016.”**



Whitener – wearing the coveted “Burt shirt” – and Reynolds at the 2017 Tribeca Film Festival in New York City.

survival thriller “Deliverance” (1972), based on the same-titled novel by James Dickey.

And while Whitener will tell you she’s a rookie at the acting thing, truth be told, she dabbled in the craft at Furman. “I took one theater class – I think it was Theatre 101 – and loved it. It helped me connect with people who were like me and not like me. It gave me the confidence to do things I didn’t imagine I would do,” she says. Whitener also points to her work as a member of the Furman O-staff (orientation staff) where skits and general horsing around come with the territory.

On set, Whitener made fast friends with leading lady Ariel Winter. And Whitener had a special relationship with the leading man, whom she respectfully dubs “Mr. Reynolds.” “He was just as much a charmer as I’ve heard he was back then,” she says.

As for future roles, Whitener is happy with her day job as a marketing executive at The Whitener Group, the production company behind the movie, and where her father Gordon Whitener is chairman and CEO. But she’s ready for anything that may come her way now that she’s a card-carrying member of the Screen Actors Guild. ●



## THEN

*Reflection on the importance of  
Furman as it was*

**I will never forget entering the front gates of Furman for the first time.** It was in April 1998, and Furman was my first college visit. While I did not visit nearly as many colleges as students do today, I did visit enough to know that Furman was special. The way the sun hit the leaves on the trees lining the entrance created an enchanting scene. I felt as if I was entering a magical place. And I was right.

However, the magic of Furman is not just in the majesty of the campus (which still takes my breath away). You feel a difference when you enter “the Furman bubble.” And it’s a difference I have not experienced anywhere since.

While a student, I was exposed to more people and cultures than I could have ever imagined I would at this small school in Greenville, South Carolina. I learned about the history and politics of Southern Africa as I traveled South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland and Namibia with professors Don Gordon and Erik Ching.

And I learned so much more within Furman’s gates. I learned the history of India and Pakistan from a Pakistani-American classmate who also introduced me to Ramadan and a deeper understanding of Islam, an understanding that I was particularly aware of as this classmate and I watched the collapse of the second tower in

the political science department common area on the morning of September 11, 2001. A classmate of Palestinian descent with the most analytical mind I have ever met gave me my first perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. And I, the descendent of slaves, would frequently sit in the student center to discuss life (and occasionally the history of the American South) with a friend and descendent of a proud Confederate family.

These interactions are how I remember Furman: a place where differing perspectives converge and where open and honest dialogue can result if you are receptive to it. At Furman, I gained a great appreciation for differing viewpoints. I learned how to separate people from their beliefs in this beautiful place where people from all backgrounds come together to live and learn from each other. That was the magic that Furman showed me.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Yendelela Neely Holston '03** is partner and chief diversity & inclusion officer at Kilpatrick Townsend. A member of the Furman Board of Trustees, Holston received the Corporate Counsel Community Champion Award in May.