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Tommy Stevenson '65 holds up a Furman jersey bearing the year his restaurant opened and (right) chats with customers.

'THEY BECOME MY CHILDREN' TOMMY'S COUNTRY HAM HOUSE

By Ron Wagner '93

Every day, Tommy Stevenson '65 gets up at 2:30 a.m. He has to if he's going to make it to work on time, which is 3:30 a.m. And every day means every day. His restaurant, Tommy's Country Ham House, is open Sunday to Sunday.

"I cut all the meat," he says. "The meat that you eat today, I cut this morning."

By Stevenson's calculations, he works about 75 hours a week and has done so since he bought the place in 1985. That doesn't leave a lot of free time, but as any Furman football player over the past three decades will tell you, he's somehow always had time for them.

"When we play football on Saturday," Stevenson says, "I usually feed the team on Friday night. I get to know all the kids, and they become my children. I look after them any time I can."

He started out by giving free meals to the men's golf program before taking on the mighty appetite of 75 college football players in around 1987. His support for Furman isn't limited to those who wear helmets on Saturday. To this day, all Furman students get a 20% discount at Tommy's Country Ham House.

"When I went to school out there, I needed all the help I could get," Stevenson says.

Tommy's Country Ham House is one of the most iconic restaurants not only in Greenville but South Carolina, thanks largely to Stevenson's tireless dedication. Known for authentic and delicious Southern breakfasts with a friendly price tag, Tommy's has

achieved fame despite – or perhaps because of – its humble appearance. It also serves as a regular stop for presidential candidates on the campaign trail.

That fame happened by accident, however. Stevenson's relationship with Furman is intentional and stemmed from the desire to give back to his alma mater when he bought the old Country Ham House. ("Tommy's" was added when the restaurant moved to its current location on Rutherford Street in 1997.)

"I see all the home (football) games and go to a good many away games," he says. Asked to name the best Furman player he's seen, he doesn't hesitate.

"Probably Ingle Martin '06," Stevenson says, referring to the University of Florida transfer whose record-setting play at quarterback led the Paladins to their last FCS playoff semifinal appearance in 2005. "He was a great athlete and a great person on top of that. He could do it all."

November will mark 35 years that Stevenson has been operating Tommy's Country Ham House. Despite a health scare in 2018 that required heart and brain surgery, he has no plans to quit his restaurant or his special relationship with Furman.

"I've met some wonderful people through the years," he says. "It's good to see when the young men come back after they've graduated how they've matured and gotten jobs. That's rewarding."

tommyscountryhamhouse.com