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Miss Nancy

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Nancy Cooper, coordinator for volunteer services for the Heller Service Corps (center), poses with students in 2023.

JEREMY FLEMING '08 | NATHAN GRAY



AFTER MORE THAN 35 YEARS AS A MENTOR AND BEST FRIEND TO THOUSANDS OF FURMAN STUDENTS, NANCY COOPER IS RETIRING AT THE END OF THE 2023-24 SCHOOL YEAR.

By Vince Moore

When Evan Thomes '21 came to visit Furman as a high school senior in 2017, he was still undecided about where he would attend college. Samford and Wake Forest were still high on his list, and he wasn't ready to commit to any school just yet.

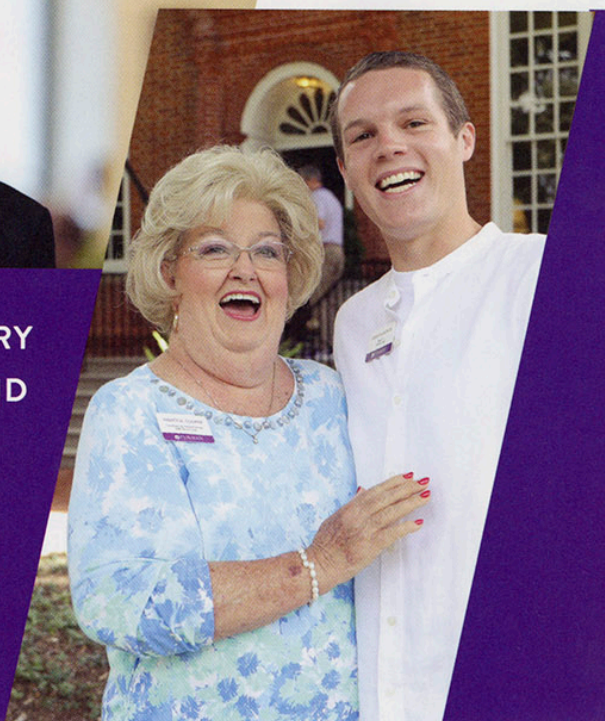
That's when the Furman admissions office decided to use its ace card, which was to send Thomes and his father over to meet Nancy Cooper, coordinator of the Heller Service Corps. Cooper had been at the heart of the award-winning service program for three decades and was legendary for the instant rapport she could establish with students.

"By the end of that meeting, I had decided I would be coming to Furman," says Thomes, who started the "Blessings in a Backpack" program at the university and served as a leader in the Heller program. "Miss Nancy is a very special person, and I knew she could be the mentor I was looking for."



"MISS NANCY IS A VERY SPECIAL PERSON, AND I KNEW SHE COULD BE THE MENTOR I WAS LOOKING FOR."

Evan Thomes '21



Cooper with Addison Smith '22 during the 2023 President's Picnic



Helene Sherman '22 during the Giving Tree Luncheon 2019

What did Cooper do in that meeting? "Evan told me he had started a program in high school that provided food bags for schoolchildren to take home on the weekend," Cooper says. "I told him if you come to Furman, you can start the same program here, and I'll put you in charge of it." That was quite a promise since it would make Thomes the only first-year student in Heller's history to serve as a coordinator.

Miss Nancy, as the students call her, knows how to get things done, which is why the Heller Service Corps is one of the most effective and respected student service organizations in the country. Each year, more than 1,200 students work with 62 community agencies to meet the needs of people throughout the Upstate. She knew what a student like Thomes could do for the Heller program and what Furman could do for him.

But getting things done only begins to describe Cooper's many gifts. Connie Carson, Furman's vice president for student life, describes Cooper as an "inviter" and "connector" who can adapt to almost any situation. She cares deeply about people, and she enjoys being around as many of them as possible at all times. And, not incidentally, Carson says, she is "wicked smart."

Cooper has had a number of supervisors over the years, and Carson told them all the same thing. "The first thing you need to realize is that you don't supervise Nancy," she says with a laugh. "You coordinate with Nancy, you collaborate with Nancy, but you need to understand you're not actually in charge."

Are there students struggling to find their way at Furman? Send them to Miss Nancy. What about first-generation students who are having trouble adjusting to life on a college campus? Let Miss Nancy speak with them.

"Nancy goes with the flow and lets the students be themselves," Carson says. "She allowed them to co-create what they wanted to be involved in and how they wanted to make a difference."

But perhaps more than anything else, Miss Nancy is fun. You'd be hard pressed to find a day when she is not smiling and laughing. She regularly highjacks admissions tours that come through the Trone Center so she can liven things up a bit for prospective students and their parents. Carson says the Heller office has to be the happiest place on campus.

Cooper persuaded Carson to dress up as Elf on the Shelf for a Christmas celebration in the Trone



Cooper speaks with Assistant Athletics Director for Marketing James McClinton III during Homecoming 2023.



Sinclair Gibson '21 (left) and Haley Shadburn '24 make friendship bracelets for Neighborhood Focus during the Heller Service Corps Day of Service Fall 2021.

Center and persuaded her into taking a pie in the face to raise money for Heller. Carson swears that not even President Elizabeth Davis could persuade her to do those things.

But whatever good things Cooper has done for Furman, she says it is nothing compared to what Furman has done for her. She went to work part time at the university in early 1988 after her husband, David, was forced to go on total disability. Cooper had been a stay-at-home mother with their two children before that.

She held three different, eight-week positions at Furman, none of which paid very well or offered benefits. She prayed every day that a full-time job would open at Furman, and her prayers were answered in May of that year when she was hired as the assistant to Betty Alverson, founder and director of the Collegiate Educational Service Corps.

She wouldn't realize it until later, but Cooper's trials at home provided a perspective that would serve her well in her new position.

"Our family had always loved giving and helping people," she says, "but I had never realized how difficult it can be to receive."



Students share the benefits of volunteering with the Heller Service Corps during the Student Involvement Fair in September 2023.



2015 Dance Marathon organized by the Heller Service Corps



2022 Rise Against Hunger

"I WATCHED STUDENTS
COME INTO HELLER
AND HAVE THEIR LIVES
TOTALLY CHANGED."

Nancy Cooper

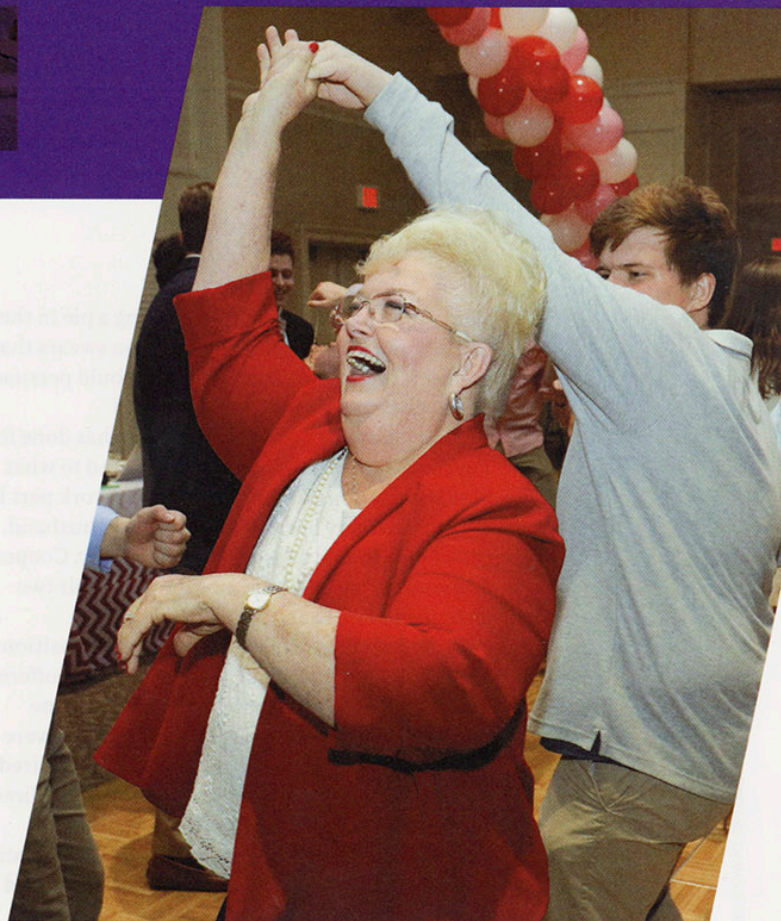
Cooper became director of the Collegiate Educational Service Corps when Alverson retired in 2000. The program was permanently endowed in 2002 and named in honor of Greenville community leaders Max and Trude Heller, which lifted the organization into a whole new realm of assistance.

"That gave us the financial resources to do some things we had never done before," Cooper says.

There is much Cooper is going to miss about Furman after she retires, but the students win this competition hands down. They made coming to work every day worthwhile, and they never failed to amaze Cooper with their hard work and effort to help others. She kept boxes of Kleenex in the Heller office because she knew how students would be affected by what they witnessed in the community.

"It was never about building resumes," Cooper says. "They do it out of the goodness of their hearts. I watched students come into Heller and have their lives totally changed."

The students also pulled Cooper through one of the darkest periods of her life when her husband unexpectedly died in 2008. She didn't want to talk about it, and she tried to pretend she wasn't hurting as badly as she was, but the students understood and



2018 Valentine's Dance



Trude Heller and Cooper during the 2019 Transfer Luncheon. Heller, who died in 2021, was the inspiration and namesake with her late husband Max Heller for the Heller Service Corps. The couple, who had known each other in Austria before fleeing the Nazis, were pillars in Greenville civic life and became deeply involved with Furman. Max Heller died in 2011.



Selection Sunday during the 2023 NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament

they wouldn't let her go down that road by herself.

"They were so loving and kind," Cooper says. "They would put a book on my desk they thought I might like. They left sweet notes. 'Do you have dinner plans tonight? Can we come over?'" For 10 years, one alum sent flowers on the date her husband died.

Cooper's relationship with her students doesn't end when they leave Furman. Barrett Taylor '21 M '22, a fifth-grade teacher in Greenville County who was Heller's student director in 2020-21, still talks with Cooper by phone every morning and meets her for dinner every Monday night.

"Miss Nancy is an incredible listener," Taylor says. "She always makes you feel like you're the most important person in the world, even though she probably has 5,000 other things she needs to be doing."

There was only one thing at Furman that Cooper could never embrace — Commencement. The first time she saw the seniors graduate and move on, the following week was like a wake. It was so bad she began scheduling her vacations the week after Commencement. It was better not to be around to experience that particular emptiness on campus.

So, when will Cooper officially retire? The day before the 2024 Commencement, of course.

"When the seniors walk across the stage and finish their time at Furman, I'm going with them," she says. ♦



Barrett Taylor '21 M '22 and Cooper during the 2019 Valentine's Dance



To honor her legacy of service and leadership, one of Heller's most cherished programs has been renamed in Nancy Cooper's honor. Scan the QR code to learn more about the Nancy Cooper Valentine's Dance for Exceptional Adults.