

Bob Benner: He's the canoeist's canoeist



Bob Benner with students

By **BOBBY HILL**
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"If I were reincarnated, I feel like I would be an Indian," he says, leaning back and stretching out his warmup-suited legs and poking up flashy athletic shoes.

For five years, Bob Benner has been director of intramurals and instructor of physical education and health at Western Piedmont Community College in Morganton. Despite the frighteningly long title, Benner looks the picture. Besides his athletic dress, Benner oozes that healthy, animal look of a person in fine tune with his body and the world. His sunburned eyebrows show just white, and the squint of his eyes from being outdoors juts like a granite ledge over a tanned face and a goatee beard.

One of the instructors at the college walks by and waves at Benner, who is sipping on a wild cherry soft drink. "There's the man with all the energy," the fellow instructor accuses jokingly, with more than a tinge of envy. Benner just grins.

But he takes his energetic image seriously. An avid environmentalist, he has used some of his calories to work toward civilized solutions that would make Indians happy. He has instituted back-

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acquainted

packing and canoeing classes at the college. He has written a book on canoeing called "Carolina Whitewater."

He has organized the local and successful Carolina Canoe Club. He was the prime mover in founding a regional canoeing tournament in Burke County, the Southeastern Intercollegiate Canoe Races, which annually draws contestants from as many as eight southeastern states.

With what energy he has left, Benner has managed to become a statesman of some stature among environmentalists. He is a member of the 12-man board of directors of the Conservation Council of North Carolina (CCNC), which has developed an awesome political wallop in this state. He is a member of the Burke County Environmental Council, conservation chairman of the Dixie division of the American Canoe Club and member of the

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National Wildlife Association and the Sierra Club.

Benner lives with his wife, Betty, and his daughter, Dawn, near Worry. "Out in the boondocks" is the way he terms the metropolis of Worry, which is actually just a crossroads adorned with a sign proclaiming the name.

The older Benner son, David, is a freshman at Western Virginia University, where he is following in his father's wake and trying out for a position on the U. S. Olympic whitewater team. The wife is a third-grade teacher at Oak Hill Elementary School, and the daughter is a sophomore at Freedom High School.

The Benner family settled in this area after broad experience in the southeast. Benner says the move to Burke County was influenced by "the standpoint of locale and good teaching possibilities in physical education."

Maybe what Benner really means is that Burke County is nestled up against the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and it is equidistant from some of the best canoeing and backpacking spots in the world. He simply loves mountains: "I just see a mountain, and I wonder what's on the other side of it."

Benner came here from the other side of the mountain after working for about 10 years with the C. V. Mosby Company, a publisher of scientific and medical publications. Before that, as he puts it, most of experience was in "private and public recreation" in the southeast.

Benner worked from 1961 to 1964 as a representative of the American Seating Company, the world's largest manufacturer of things like stadium and theatre seats. Also during 1961, he was manager of the National Aquatic Club of Columbus, Ga.

From 1959 to 1961, he was superintendent of the recreation department of the city of Starke, Fla. Before that, he worked as a probation officer, life insurance agent, and again as recreation director for a city.

Benner received a B.S. degree in physical education from the University of Georgia, and he holds a master's degree in recreation from the University of Illinois.

"I've done a lot of things, tried a lot of things," Benner muses somewhat philosophically, with a trace of understatement. Now, he says, he has decided to "limit" himself to the principal goals of teaching, canoeing and protecting the environment.

This personal desire to become proficient is also urged on other people in Benner's canoeing book, in which he ad-

vocates the joining of clubs to learn the art of paddling in rough water. When asked if he has an "expert's" philosophy, Benner says somewhat wistfully that most people go through life dabbling at a great number of things and that they "can't be good at any of them." It is an answer befitting a man about to be reincarnated as an Indian.

One can't help but wonder if this "expert" philosophy extends to Benner's political ambitions and goals. When asked questions of political concern about conservation issues, Benner does not take on the rabid manner of many evangelical environmentalists.

Rather, his face takes on a serious look when he talks about areas that need to be saved from development and civilization. His granite eyebrows slope even further forward to accent his concern. He cares. On these issues, Benner oozes care.

Benner does say that some of his goals in this area are to promote the proposed Mountain Area Management Act and to pass a law protecting the Green River. In response to a couple of inflammatory questions, Benner would not raise to the bait and lambast certain political figures who environmentalists might feel stand in the way of conservation concerns.

Bob Benner's personality seems to be composed of several dangerous whitewater rapids — and a lot of deep, calm water. He will undoubtedly be reincarnated as an Indian.