

Burke County Profiles

Curiosity should be Fred Acuff's middle name

BY SHERRY WILLIAMSON
Wire Editor

Whether it's how to fly an airplane, how to grow ginseng or how many g-forces an elevator produces, one Western Piedmont Community College teacher has spent a lifetime trying to quench a relentless appetite for learning.

"I've always had a tremendous curiosity," said Fred Acuff, a natural science instructor. "I've always wanted to learn as much as I can about everything."

Acuff, a 16-year instructor at the college, teaches mostly chemistry and earth science.

"I love it," said Acuff of his profession. "I guess getting students interested in a course and watching them learn is the primary reason I do."

And it is a field that he must love after having devoted almost 28 years to the teaching profession. He has taught at Oak Hill School, Glen Alpine High School, Southwestern Junior College in Keene, Texas, and at a Georgia High School.

Teaching the same subjects has never become boring for him because "each time I have a new bunch of students, and I am trying to figure out a better and an easier way to explain something."

Acuff also points to the innovations in science during the last 20 years — innovations which cause him to spend at least five hours a week reading to keep up with the latest scientific discoveries.

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As for what his favorite subject is, Acuff resists any attempt to narrow him down to a particular field of interest by saying, "I like best whatever I'm teaching at a given moment ... If you become too specialized it takes the fun out of it."

Acuff's natural curiosity was nurtured by his mother, who was also a teacher, and by his carpenter/plumber father, who wanted his children to learn about the trades.

Looking back at his childhood, Acuff remembered how an ordinary walk in the woods would become a questions and answer session.

"When we walked out in the woods and found a bird nest, we had to find out exactly what kind of bird lived in it," he said. "If we found bird eggs we had to find out what kind, if we found animal tracks, we had to find out what kind of animal made them."

"I'm still that way," said Acuff as he sat in his office filled with

stacks of books and rows of labeled boxes filled with different types of rocks.

"I like to read everything. I have to read everything I find. It's hard because it's time consuming. I still have that curiosity."

Acuff's curiosity has caused him to learn about many things. One of the most rewarding is the thrill of flying. After learning to fly in 1962, Acuff still has a pilot's license and is the adviser for the WPC Flying Club.

His other interests include doing work as a contractor, and raising and selling popcorn and ginseng. He owns three trail bikes and enjoys motorcycling as well as hiking.

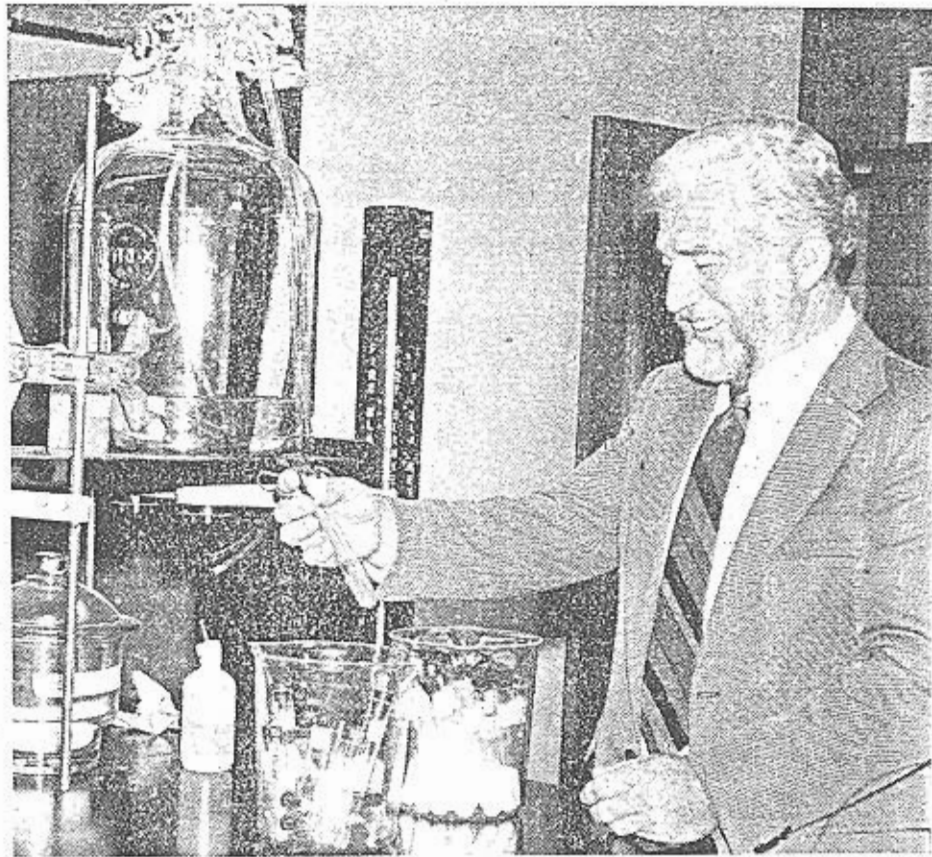
Acuff and his wife, Chole, live between Lake James and the fish hatchery, and have been married for about 35 years after meeting in college.

He credits his wife with giving him full support and encouragement for his work. The couple has three grown children and four grandchildren.

An elder at Table Rock Seventh Day Adventist Church, Acuff says he has been a member of the church for most of his life and that it has had a major influence on his lifestyle.

Originally intending to be a dentist, Acuff said, "by the time I finished college I knew I was not interested in looking in people's mouths all day."

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Fred Acuff in his Western Piedmont laboratory.

Photo by Alan Martin

Acuff plans to travel

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He instead pursued a bachelor of science degree from Southern College of Seven Day Adventist and later a master's degree in science teaching from the University of North Dakota.

Acuff moved from California to Burke County when he was three years old and except for a small number of years his home has been here ever since.

"I prefer western North Carolina over any place I've seen," he said

However, Acuff, who is eligible for retirement in about five years, says that when he does retire that he plans to travel.

The reason why: "Traveling is so educational, it satisfies the curiosity, and learning about anything . . . It doesn't make a difference what. I love it.

"Whether it's heredity or not, I've always had a question I wanted to find an answer to," said Acuff, who admits with a smile, that "not many people are as curious as I am."