

Western Piedmont made special by people

In my column published on this page on Dec. 29, 1992, I wrote about my entering Western Piedmont Community College at an advanced age in 1983 and how I got along there.

Today, I'd like to give my impressions of some of the staff.

The buildings on the WPCC campus are well-designed, modern, rather attractive in a non-pretentious way and well situated in a hilly setting pleasing to the eye.

But this physical makeup, although important to the student, tells little about the character of the institution. That depends far more on the quality and disposition of the president, instructors, maintenance workers and custodians than on architecture.

No doubt partly because of my age, I got to know a number of these people somewhat better than most younger students, who tended to look upon teachers as adversaries.

Knowing a little about concerns in leadership roles, I could relate to my instructors' problems. I think I can count the members of WPCC's staff I came in contact with among my friends.

In earlier years, I thought of college presidents as unapproachable, austere, maybe harsh in demeanor. Nothing in that list applies to Dr. Jim Richardson, who leads WPCC with a sure hand.

I found him to be courteous, amiable, willing to listen, ready to help. This spirit, I am convinced, permeates his institution.

An example: since I arrived at the college each day on foot and sometimes wet, I used a restroom in the Student Services Building to remove outerwear and to

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get my backpack rearranged for classes.

I found neither coatbooks nor bathtubs there at first, which made the facility inconvenient for the purpose. But when I mentioned this to the head maintenance man, he installed several coatbooks and a shelf for books and hats in short order.

Comparatively few people are fortunate enough to engage in a vocation that is also their avocation. I consider these blessed.

Ruby Pharr is the best example I know, for she appears to be in love with her work in biology. I took botany in one of her classes at a time she was taking care of aged, infirm parents in addition to her duties in her profession, her immediate family and in other activities connected with civic life.

Yet, she taught in an organized, enthusiastic way that was greatly beneficial to her students.

Taking field trips in groups she led were some of the most memorable and instructive experiences of my life. On spring, summer, autumn and winter overnight expe-

ditions to study wild plants in their natural habitats, she not only drove the college van, lectured, hiked with her charges and looked after them in general, she also cooked excellent meals for us all. Her husband, the affable and knowledgeable Walter Pharr, assisted on a volunteer basis.

Ralph Soney, the African-American instructor under whom I took two courses in history, is a man who utilizes every minute of classroom time.

How he can lecture and write rapidly on the blackboard at the same time is more than I can understand. His method, though, stimulates eye and ear together, giving his students a considerable advantage in retaining the material presented.

His active class discussions and system of employing mini-tests also help lock his subjects into the memory.

If my grandchildren, who are now in college, lived in this area, I'd want them to be in his classes.

Paul Wardzinski, whose chief subject at WPCC is English, taught one of my philosophy courses. In it, the class was guided by textbooks, of course, but the chief teaching tool Paul used was one of intense discussion of the topic of the day among his students, with Wardzinski acting as moderator.

Although some history of philosophy was taught, our main thrust was toward determining what constituted truth, reality and an effective learning process.

We sought, under Paul's direction, to learn the approaches to "the fine art of wondering" which itself is a revealing definition of his subject.

I would find pleasure in participating in discussions of philosophy, so defined, with Paul on a regular basis.

Now I come to Roy McGalliard, but definitely not as

least and last. I can't imagine Mac as last or least in anything — not in teaching, dramatics, controversy or life itself.

He is a big man with reddish hair and beard, and a positive, energetic approach to whatever project engaged in at the moment. Often called a character, he has earned the term in its best sense.

I studied English and American literature under Roy McGalliard, finding his class sessions anything but dry or dull. It delighted me to hear him read aloud from "The Miller's Tale" from Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales" and Byron's "Don Juan," among other works.

When he read from the epic "Beowulf," it was easy for me to see Mac in the title role, for he made that character come alive.

Some of the teachers whose courses I took are now longer with WPCC. George Fouts transferred to another community college. John Carenen, a fine man and an excellent teacher, went back into a Christian service work with young people, an endeavor he considers his true call. Ruth Thomas retired, as did some of the non-teaching staff I knew.

Each had a distinctly different personality; all were distinguished by the high quality of their work. They made a lasting impact.

As my brother, George Dean, puts it, "Age has no boundaries beyond which wisdom cannot grow."

Everyday learning is an integral part of living. When one stops learning, he starts dying.

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