

The New Guy

By Karin Zipf

A student internship with Dr. Paul Escott changed the course of my life. Thank goodness, too, because I almost quit Wake Forest for UNC-Chapel Hill. An alluring summer session living just off Franklin Street nearly ensnared me. Though UNC was hardly hedonistic, it certainly was more fun than Wake Forest. I realized that Wake was more academically challenging, less exciting (have you ever been to Cat's Cradle?) and, back then, lacked diversity and only awkwardly accommodated female students. We were still referred to as "coeds" and constituted only about thirty-five percent of the student body.

Despite the siren song of Franklin Street, I decided to give Wake a second chance. Bound for law school, I chose history as my major. When I returned to campus, I called the department chair. Might I apply for a job typing papers? In fact, he responded, a brand new professor had arrived from UNC-Charlotte, hired as a distinguished professor in southern history. He needed a student assistant. Did I want the job? Yes, I did, I said. I did not even have an interview. To this day, I think the department chair, Dr. Howell Smith, hired me on the spot because someone tipped him off that I might go AWOL on WFU.

I met Paul Escott on my first day of work. To Howell Smith's credit, it seemed a good match. Immediately, Dr. Escott impressed me by his friendly demeanor. Unfamiliar with Wake Forest, he needed a student's perspective. As the new guy, he trusted me to show him the ropes. For my part, I needed a job, but I also needed a mentor. For the next two years, not only did I enroll in his classes, but I photocopied, ran errands, and even helped out as a sitter for his two awesome kids. Lauren and I carved pumpkins at Halloween, and I was at the Escott home when David first learned to read.

I can't exaggerate the lasting impact Paul had on me as a teacher and a mentor. In class, we discussed important books in southern history that I had never previously encountered. My most vivid memory is learning about slavery in eastern North Carolina from the perspective of a woman, Harriet Jacobs, who escaped Edenton, a town near my own eastern North Carolina home. In high school, we read little on slavery, and no one ever inquired why enslavement might be especially hard on a woman. In class, Paul asked us to consider the most heart-wrenching questions to understand the reality of the southern experience. Exposure to this new mode of inquiry helped me formulate my own research questions. He was teaching us the craft of the historian. As his student assistant, I learned even more. I photocopied a lot of documents, articles and other stuff. One day, Paul asked me to duplicate his curriculum vita. It was the first time I had seen a professor's "resume." The CV was about twelve pages long and included reference to his every publication, presentation, award and major responsibility. I began to understand the autonomy, the research inquiry and his sense of obligation to his students and colleagues. As I handed back the work, I pretended not to have read a thing, but suddenly academe was no longer an abstraction. I seriously began to consider a career as a history professor.

My close relationship with Paul has continued to this day. For thirty years he has been a loyal mentor and a true friend. He has read my work, provided invaluable guidance, and written about one million letters of recommendation on my behalf. When a major press rejected my book manuscript, he strongly encouraged me not to lose confidence and to send it out again. He is a model of success in the field, and he offers an example of how to mentor students and junior colleagues. In his tenure as Dean

of the College of Arts and Sciences, he rose far above the administrative duties of the job. The role of the dean, he showed us, is to serve as a champion of a liberal arts education, especially in the promotion of the humanities. Even more importantly, my time with his kids helped me understand the struggles and successes of balancing work and family.

What a wise decision it was for me at twenty years old to choose to stay at Wake Forest. I know now (and I suspected then) that very few other undergraduate programs would offer me the opportunity to forge such a long-term friendship with such a distinguished professor and such a special person. Thank you, Paul, for your devotion, your example, and your contributions to the profession, and congratulations on a retirement well-earned.