

Interview with Barry Wood, Director of Development: 11/7/85
Jane Webb

I graduated from Hampden Sydney in 1959 and went to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia where I took a Masters. During my second year I was studying and working as a teaching assistant when William and Mary went their Vice President for Academic Affairs to recruit new teacher for English at William and Mary. That was January. About three weeks later I got a call from Scott Cunningham from the campus of William and Mary. The Vice President for Academic affairs had forwarded my name as a potential teacher for the new Christopher Newport College.

Legally Christopher Newport came into being in July of 1961 although it was not until September of 1961 that the Board of Visitors at William and Mary gave it its name and chose Scott Cunningham, then Admissions Director at William and Mary, as the first director for CNC. They charged Scott Cunningham with selecting the first staff: 8 fulltime faculty and two part-time faculty. And he was also to employ the first Director of Admissions, the Registrar, and the head of the Business Office--oh, and a janitor and a secretary. The first secretary was the mother of Scott Cunningham's secretary. Her name was Edna Carney.

In the spring of 1961 I went to William and Mary to meet Scott Cunningham and to talk to him there in the Office of Admissions. I was taken with his penetrating look and his grasp of what fundamental problems faced the new school, and by the time we were through talking, I was very excited about going to a school that had no history. It attracted me, coming to a place that was not yet formed and that I could help form. I had five other offers that spring, one offer that came from William and Mary, and I chose Christopher Newport because I was so interested in the open-endedness of it all.

I have never been sorry about that choice that I made that year. It has often seemed to me that Frost's poem describes my choice: "I chose the path least traveled by, and that has made all the difference." It has made all the difference.

There have been some things that I have regretted. My major source of regret is the failure of a collegial atmosphere to develop over time, the failure of a sharable professional life to develop. In a sense, it is intellectual dialogue that keeps us all alive. I have had to sustain myself through reading and preparation for classes, but seldom if ever do I find myself in an intellectual dialogue with a colleague in our offices or in our homes.

Maturing as a thinker requires the existence of a critical mass of thinkers. One CAN mature sitting at home reading, but not in the same way as one

might, say, running into Cleanth Brooks and saying, I have just read "Light in August" for the tenth time and this is what I have seen," to which he might respond, "Yes, and in my reading I note this, also." And there is a kind of electric intensity that develops and helps one grow. Here exchanges are largely political, or sometimes just laments regarding various circumstances; for example, the quality of the public schools and their products which whom we cope year after year. There is seldom anything above that.

There have, of course, been joys. I have met people like Ramsey Clark and Bill Styron, and many New York musical performers, and I have had them in my own house and have spent days with them. At big schools, of course such people would have come, but I would have had no personal contact with them. So I have gotten to do things I loved, and I am broader because of it.

There are other reasons for joy here. Always coming into the classroom for twenty years of teaching, I have always had at least one excellent, even brilliant student. The first was Jim Cornette, who is now an adjunct on the faculty here. His first paper reflecting on "Young Goodman Brown" revealed a very thorough knowledge of Aristotle's "Poetics" and I was so shocked with that knowledge that I thought the J. W. Daniels Building had its first bona fide honors violation. So I called in Mr. Cornette and I talked to him, and when we finished I realized it was necessary to stay up more hours at night to prepare for a class in which he was a student.

Also in that class was Paula Clark, now Paula Rankin. After fourteen years of instruction, we came to a parting of the ways only at her graduation. She, I feel, has become the poet that she is in part because of her long stay at Christopher Newport. Each year after that, the student body has produced someone of that magnitude, and I became convinced of the high value of a school that permits access to higher education in the way that CNC did, and I lost my desire to treat Christopher Newport as a place to break myself in and then move on--to Amherst, say, or to Hampden Sydney, where I would teach in a small rural setting 18 to 22 year old students who could easily afford a trip to the rural environment. So Christopher Newport served to answer a deep need in me to feel that I have done something of great value.

What has probably haunted this school, which it did not have to face in the beginning because it borrowed its identity from William and Mary is the problem of who you are, what you are doing, and why you are doing it. For a long time, we lived under the cover of the identity of William and Mary. No one here, faculty or staff, would think more deeply than simply to say, "we are the branch of William and Mary." Then William and Mary had to define us, and called us its "urban expression." Dr. Pascal invented that term, which was forced on him by the Southern Association of Colleges

during their 1972 adventure at William and Mary; the Southern Association forced that statement about Christopher Newport and so we became the urban arm.

What did that mean? No one really knew. Certainly Davis Pascal didn't know. Newport News, Hampton, York County, James City County, Poquoson--they did not lead to an easy understanding of "urban." It wasn't the same system as the big urban conglomerates. We took counties and towns and thought when we named them cities they would become urban, but it didn't happen. And people sense it--there is a sort of pathos to people's feelings that they would like to go back to being counties and towns, but it is as Thomas Wolf suggested, no one can go home again. At the same time, there is a sort of impotence to go forward, too. So the community itself--there is a way in which it thinks of itself as a failure, and in some ways Christopher Newport absorbed that mental state. If you could bring in a sociologist who studied defeated nations, I suspect you would find that some of the attitudes that are characteristic of defeat are present here.

The first year of the school, Dwight Wright, a six foot much of an overweight kid who had graduated from high school a year before coming to Christopher Newport gave me his first essay. When I returned it, I gave him a grade in the low 30s. The second essay came in. That grade was in the high 30s.

The next week before the third essay was due, he came in my office, threw the first two essays down on my desk and said, "This won't do. This has got to stop." I agreed with him. "I worked one full year to get my tuition," he said, "and I did not do all that work for 30s." I pointed out that moving from the lower 30s to the higher 30s was progress of a sort, but that wasn't enough for him. He set up appointments with me and he visited me three times a week in the afternoon for private sessions until he began to make significant progress.

As I talked to him, I found that he liked carpentry and he had in summers worked as a carpenter's assistant, and I began to talk to him about the process of composition in the language of carpentry: nails as marks of punctuation, and so on. And I found that he was a bright kid, but that no one had ever talked to him and no one had found it. The brightness was hidden from himself as well as from others. He was very crude. His grammar was awful and his spelling was terrible. But the idea that he was building a house captured him and at the end of the third year we spent together, he was earning B+s and A-s in writing. Now he has a MASTers and is teaching handicapped people industrial arts--he was in Guam when I last heard. I always think of him as the best reason for going on--there must be a hundred people in Hampton and Newport News like that fellow who need someone to help them uncover what they have.

There was another fellow--Bob () He just walked into my office one day and said, "I want to thank you." Well, I didn't even remember who he was, but of course I said I was always willing to take thanks. He had sat in my class for one semester, not turning in a single paper. Then he went to Florida, entered Miami University, dropped out, came home, enrolled in ODU, dropped out, and one day he thought to himself that the only class he ever sat through that was worth taking was the one he had taken from me. So he had come back and re-enrolled in the school. Today he has a Ph.D. in reading and teaches at a private school in Alabama. I did not even know he was in my class.

So we are here. And often we are the only hole in the future for someone.

Very early on I discovered that to hold the students' attention I had to be very dramatic, and I developed hyperbolic speech and a hyperbolic physical presence in the classroom, particularly on the first day. One first day I waxed eloquent on the difference between high school and college, and on the front left hand side of the room sat a girl who as I continued grew greener and greener. As the bell rang, it so startled her that she threw up.

More and more pieces of paper cross my desk that say, send us people who can think. Send us problem solvers. I do not believe that MBA programs are filling that need.

The faculty member I think of often as having had a great effect on the Collegfe was John Harwood. He had a great impact on how we treated the wide variety of students who came to us and he did it well. We had not met the needs of some of our students, and I hope that having to integrate the basic studies program that he set up into the English and Mathematics Departments will not erase the good that he set in motion, although I fear it will. You have to have good people as well as strong to carry out that mission in the new setting.

If I had just one wish--just one thing--I would wish that more of my colleagues and the students would understand and believe the statement of William Garfield at Williams College about Mark Hopkins and the log, that "Mark Hopkins at one end and me at the other is all the school you need." That might take us away from the self-deprecation which has set in because our library cannot compare with the libraries where we went to graduate school, because our laboratories do not have equipment sufficient to the contemporary world. All those things will come with time but will only come if we improve our own perspective and our health.

If I had a second wish, I would wish for a convocation center, where we could experience ourselves in larger units than the 30 x 30 classroom. We don't ever have the opportunity to experience ourselves in larger units.

And then I would work trhat convocation center to death--with athletics, speakers, bands, and I'd make us get together. A student sat here the other day and said that the only thing collegial about this school is graduation. That's the only time, he said, that I even find out who is in my class."