

Commentary

Woodruff: knowledge, adventure merge

by Rob Cowles
Clarion Reporter

Spontaneity plays a lead part in Preston Woodruff's script. Only, he is not acting out any script. To this veteran journalist and teacher at Brevard College, life seems to be an undetermined adventure in which he in a remote controller changing channels at will. His favorite channels just happen to be jamming with his band "Cullowhee Consort," writing books, traveling to exotic places, and fulfilling his desire to consume knowledge. His objectivity clears the stations giving him an unobstructed path in which to leave his mark through communication.

17 years ago, an Emory graduate student entered a Brevard classroom taking a huge chance by not even preparing for class. As a teacher, that is, Woodruff decided to see if he could improvise. Ten minutes into class he paused for a second realizing he had

found what he wanted to do.

Even though acquiring the teaching job was an accident, the five years of hysterical lifestyle he spent as a journalist teetering on the edge of danger proved essential to his development of spontaneity.

At the bottom of the journalistic ladder, Woodruff began as an obituaries writer for the Atlanta Constitution adding, "Someone had to do it." Soon he took over writing "stringers" or small town prize gossip as he reeled it in from area bonanzas in Georgia.

His interest in the theatre manifested as he acquired, by chance, the writing of the theatre section of the paper, enhancing his love of Shakespeare and the Renaissance.

Dangers of being a journalist became apparent on a day-to-day basis as he took over action stories.

During the racial riots in Atlanta back in the 1960s, he narrowly escaped a stray bullet. "The guy who shot at me must have been a bad shot," he says

with a surprisingly serious smile.

Another wild adventure occurred when he got a call early one morning to go cover a breaking story." He says, "A guy had three shot guns and was a bit beserk." Woodruff laughs explaining, "I was riding in the car with a crazed photographer who was driving 80 miles per hour, not afraid of death, hungry for the Pulitzer Prize. The guy had one hand on the wheel and the other on a cigarette. By the time we got there the cops had already shot the guy."

Woodruff enjoyed the variety of reporting because "no day is exactly the same."

For Woodruff, the theme of knowledge-seeking and adventure has clashed and merged many times over the years to form new directions.

In 1971, while continuing his to study for his Ph.D., Woodruff regularly rose at 4 a.m. from a tent in southern Israel in time to get a head start on the sun. The archeological excavations he took part in came to a direct halt around

1 p.m. daily as the scorching heat forced the workers to rest from exhaustion.

Later, taking advantage of a great privilege, a sabbatical from Brevard College, he moved to London, England, for a year to study theology at Oxford. It was not all hard work and no play.

During free time, he learned to love British murder mysteries, adding, "I'm not interested in who committed the murder, but how you solve the puzzle."

These complex ideas will pay off as he plans to write a couple of murder mysteries as soon as he completes the "Old Testament Text" with which he is currently dueling. He says, "Writing books takes imagination. You have to put yourself in the position of the reader when writing. Most texts do not do that and that is unfortunate."

Simplicity is Woodruff's most important goal. He says, "most textbooks wind up with the author writing them sounding like love songs --

(Turn to Page 3)

