

# From Beatnik to Scholar: A hitch-hiker's guide

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The first day of "Beat Generation" literature class, Strickland walked in fitting the bill for what kind of professor one would envision teaching the course. He wore flannel, boots, baggy jeans and had a braided pony tail that hit halfway down his back. He looked like a character right off the pages of "On the Road" by Jack Kerouac, and once he told the class about his journeys during his younger years, the students realized that he is.

Michael Strickland's early adulthood was slightly different than most, unless half of Elon is hitchhiking up to Montreal for a weekend fueled by Kerouac readings.

Growing up Strickland had an obvious liking for books. "I was a reader from early on," he said. "Reading about other places made me want to experience them." Born in 1954 and raised in Polly Island, S.C., Strickland developed a strong interest for one of the more controversial writers of the time, Jack Kerouac. Kerouac's rambling narratives and philosophies on living a raw life sparked a revolution amongst the underbelly of 1950's America, a revolution that may be best encapsulated by "On the Road," his most famous novel.

Strickland can attest, saying that at 16 years old he was influenced to pick up a rather daring hobby. "Hitchhiking, I attribute that to reading On The Road," he said. "Literally, within of couple of weeks, I started hitchhiking. It just began from there, I even got in this train thing for several years." The "train thing" was not nearly as casual as he made it appear.

Strickland bought an Amtrak student pass that lasted 90 days and made sure every day counted. "I had an arbitrary rule to never stay more than three days in one place," he said with a grin. "Even if I was having a great time, I would get up, walk to the train station and see where it was going and say 'alright, take me there.'" His travels took him all over South-west United States, up to Canada and south to Mexico.

In between his travels, Strickland got his education at Naropa

Institute in Boulder Colo., a college where he studied under the likes of Alan Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and William Burroughs. Once he graduated, he found himself in a position many often do: antsy.

"Literally, for years I could not sit still in one place, I'd just get antsy, start freaking out," admits Strickland. He loved to study, but never found his undeniable passion during his time in school, leaving him with few options in the white-collar world. "After college, the thought of getting a job where I had to put on a suit and go to an office, I couldn't even fathom," he said. "So, for years, and I've always been big on having other skill sets, all along the way I learned construction skills and woodworking skills." He points to this outlet as a saving grace, a guide during a transitional period from a nomadic beatnik to a part of the American workforce.

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-Michael Strickland  
Beat Generation professor

Luckily for Elon students Strickland found his way into teaching, a field that he unconsciously prepared himself for throughout life with the many lessons learned and experiences earned from his travels.

Patrick Lyon, a sophomore at Elon, attended Strickland's Winter Term class and came away a changed man. "He blew me away," Lyon exclaimed. "First thing is, he casually mentions that he studied under Alan Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. That alone is incredible, but his ability to communicate with students is uncanny, because he speaks from experience, from experience we are reading about in the novels he assigns." Lyon continued to praise Strickland's ability to push conceptual boundaries with students, questioning social norms and taboos, like gov-



PHOTO BY KATY CANADA

Strickland's hitch-hiking past allows for rich stories to be told in the classroom.

ernment control and drug use.

Jared Fitzgerald, a sophomore at Elon, agreed completely. "He [Strickland] broadened my mind plain and simple," Fitzgerald admits. "We got into a deep talk about how the millennial generation is anesthetized by social media and consumerism, something that I never ever thought about. I mean I'm 20 years old, I have never had to think that deep, and

that's definitely something I loved about taking his class."

Being able to share his stories with students links his two worlds together, scholar and adventurer, becoming a breed of teacher that is rare in today's education field. To quote the prophetic Kerouac, "The best teacher is experience", something Michael Strickland has plenty of.