

The Alstons: In Their Own Words

This issue's "In Their Own Words" features a couple of school figures who are instantly recognizable in spite of their low profile and behind-the-scenes methodology. In addition to wit, wisdom, love of NCSSM, and fondness for Bob Dylan, these two great men are fortunate enough to share a last name. The Stentorian proudly presents: Lester Alston and Dr. Richard Alston, in their own words.

Lester Alston

IGOR GORODEZKY

How long have you been at NCSSM?

I've been here four and a half years. Very nice place to work. Nice people to work with.

How did you find your way here?

In 1989 I worked here through a temporary agency called Western Temporary Services. Back then I was real young, and I wasn't able to afford getting paid by the month. I could have been hired then, but I refused it. So then, four and a half years ago, the same opportunity came up and I took advantage of it, and that's how I got back.

Do you feel a lot has changed since you've been here?

Oh yeah. It's a whole lot better than what it was back then.

Could you elaborate?

Well, the equipment we work with. And the staff; I think the staff is a whole lot better. You know, you have a lot more unity.

What do you think about the kids here?

Oh, there are some beautiful kids. Real smart, real smart. And I enjoy seeing them everyday, and being with them everyday. Good kids...

You're from Jordan high school, right?

Right.

What was your favorite subject in high school?

You wouldn't believe this! It was P.E., because it was so much fun, and no stress. You know what I mean?

Yeah, I saw that you said, in our Survival Guide, that you enjoy sports.

Yeah, I used to play basketball at Jordan.

Do you keep track of the basketball team here?

Oh yeah. Over the last few years they haven't had a great season, but they still put out an effort to win, so I still support them.

You like any other sports?

I like football, but I don't like to play it; I like to watch it. Also, I like baseball. I like to play a little baseball, softball.

Do you like the color on Ground Reynolds right now?

Yeah... I like that. It brightens up the place, you know? Instead of that dull gray. I also like all the new changes that are coming.

You mean, the construction changes?

Yeah, construction. And we've got a new plant facility director, and I think he's a very good person to work with.

What are the plans for that, do you know?

I don't know right off. I haven't gotten those details yet.

So, you went to Jordan High School, and now you're at NCSSM, so how long have you been in Durham?

All my life: forty-five years. I think if I went anywhere else, I probably wouldn't know how to act, you know, because I'm so used to this right here. If I went to the big city, it would take me so long to adjust to it. I'm what you'd call a "down south ol' country boy."

Have you ever wished that you could travel somewhere else?

Hopefully in the near future I'll get an opportunity to do some traveling.

Where would you like to go?

I'd love to go to Florida, Hawaii, Arizona; places like that.

You wouldn't happen to have any pets, would you?

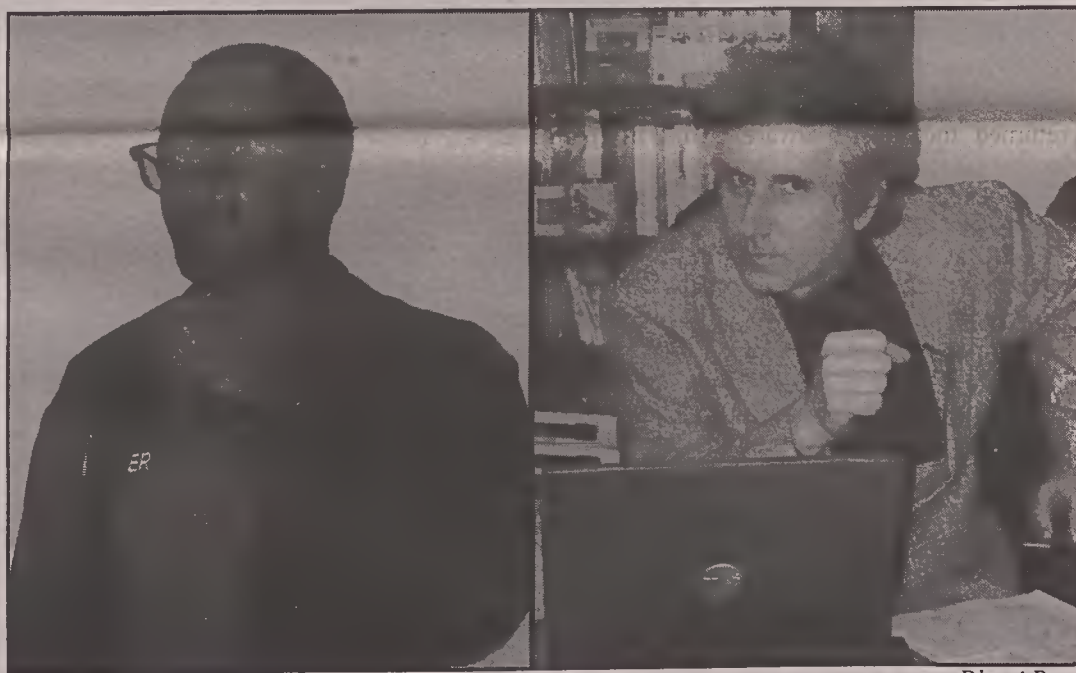
No, coming up as a kid, I didn't have too much good luck with dogs. My dogs always ended up getting hit. That's the only pet I've ever really cared for, is a dog.

Ok, so this is blatantly trying to make a connection between you and Dr. Richard Alston, but he really loves Bob Dylan, so we were wondering if...

Oh, you wouldn't believe this, I like Bob Dylan! In high school, there used to have this radio station, WQDR, out of Raleigh, and they used to play all that type of music. But I like Bob Dylan, I still do. He's awesome... He makes a lot of sense.

Do you have any advice for the students here?

Once you get the opportunity to come here, stay alert, and stay focused, and you're going to go somewhere in life. That's a guarantee. Because you've got some beautiful instructors, and they're here with their hands out to help you if you want to go somewhere in life. And most kids that come here, they've got a good head. Lots of book sense. So, they can't go wrong if they want the proper amount of support; it's here for them.



Lester Alston and Dr. Richard Alston: See the resemblance?

Dhruti Patel

Dr. Richard Alston

ANNAFRANCESCA FUCHS

How long have you been at NCSSM?

Four years. Feels like forty.

How did you wind up here?

I came here from Duke University where I was the director of a program for molecular biology, which is a sequencing analysis facility. I was there from the early 90s to just prior to coming here.

How has NCSSM changed in the time you've been here?

The students are dumber, and the staff is much smarter.

Your bio in our Survival Guide mentions that you enjoy the poetry of Bob Dylan. Do you have a favorite verse?

"Steal a little and they throw you in jail, steal a lot and they make you king."

That's from the song "Sweetheart Like You."

How did you become so computer savvy?

Who's spreading rumors about my ersatz savviness? But, assuming the point...

I did my dissertation on sequencing analysis techniques. ... What I was doing with computers was writing modeling programs and looking

at the ways these mRNA molecules folded into three-dimensional space, and seeing what those relationships were vis-à-vis the structure of the ribosome. And one couldn't do this in vitro, one couldn't do this in the test tubes, so I had to model it. And that's how I headed down the slippery slope of using computers as a major research tool.

And at the university then, I was initially working with the research groups there in molecular biology, and, like everything at Duke, it is the Medical Center that pays the bills and like a black hole sucks in all material wandering by too closely. I got too

close and by the time I left there, I was working with clinical operations. I had just designed the meds order database in the cancer center. The pressure was too much; I didn't like the idea of being responsible for prescribing all these poisons to people and wondering how it was turning out, so that's why I made the decision to come here.

But more than that, when I was at Duke, and working with the molecular bio program, we worked with many students from Science & Math through the mentorship program. And so, I knew about the school from that, I knew about the quality of the

students from the school, so when it came time to make a change, it seemed like the natural decision. What was the question again?

"Why are you so computer savvy?"

Oh, yeah. Right, right.

So, was your research successful? Did your model prove useful?

Yeah.

Well ... no.

It was an abysmal bit of research, actually. There were some general conclu-