CROSS ROADS

DON FORTENBERRY REFLECTS ON HIS JOURNEY ACROSS THREE DECADES OF CHANGE AT MILLSAPS

"From: Fortenberry, Don. Subject: Community Concerns." One of the first things you notice as a new member of the Millsaps community is the routine arrival of Community Concerns emails from the Office of the Chaplain. They come, sometimes two or three times a week, heralding the impending marriage of a faculty member, mourning a death in the family of an administrator, or alerting the campus that one of us is in the hospital.

These brief electronic missives, routine after so many years,bring a sense of human connection to the College, amplify the personal in an often impersonal world, and let all of us know that our lives matter.

And now the College community is concerning itself with Dr. Don Fortenberry, author of those emails, showing that it is he, this time, who matters deeply. Not only was the first Don Fortenberry Award for scholarship and service bestowed at the 2004 commencement, but alumni—many of whose lives he helped shape—have established the Don Fortenberry Endowed Scholarship, announced in November at Homecoming.

Fortenberry has led the College through 30 years of turbulent social change, guided by ideals forged during the fury that was Mississippi in the late 1950s and '60s. It was a storm that you either rode out in the shelter of the status quo or confronted, head on, with what you knew to be right. Fortenberry, who has been called the best college chaplain in the United States, chose the latter. And, often through the work of his Campus Ministry Team, he has helped Millsaps find its identity as an environment where students can tackle, fearlessly, the most complex, controversial issues of our time.

"As chaplain for some 30 years, he has shown thousands of young men and women that true ministry means 'ministering,' getting involved, and that true joy and fulfillment come through service to others, especially those less fortunate," wrote Lynda Lee in her scholarship petition. "He lit a fire in the hearts and opened the eyes of students who could have stayed sheltered in the comfortable microcosm of the campus, and he led them out to work and serve in the community of need. He dared speak of poverty, illness, homelessness, AIDS, addiction, death and dying, child abuse and abandonment, depression, and hunger, and he took his Campus Ministry Team right into the midst of it all."

Fortenberry says he is on a pilgrimage, and that his journey is not unlike that of his students. On a rare break from a hectic day, he took time out to reflect on his years at the College and the spiritual road trip he has undertaken with the students—sometimes as driver, sometimes as passenger, but always as a companion with welcoming arms and an open heart and mind.

BY JOHN WEBB

They call you a "legend," Dr. Fortenberry.

That means I'm old. I know what that means.

So what first brought you to Millsaps, in 1958?

I had grown up going to Methodist camps and assemblies. The youth ministry program was very strong and very active in Mississippi, and almost all of the college leadership consisted of Millsaps students. It was a logical journey from there to here. That tie with youth ministry does not exist in quite that same way anymore.

Why not?

It's a long, long story and there was a whole series of factors. One was that there was a great deal of tension between the College and many local congregations during the civil rights period. Another is that when I came here the majority of ministers in the Conference had gone to Millsaps. In subsequent years, that began to change as people went to other colleges. Then there began to be increasing conflict over theology—not a new phenomenon, and Millsaps was viewed as espousing much more liberal theology through its Department of Religion than they perceived was true in other colleges in the state that offered religion courses. Then, of course, underneath that were the slow but inevitable demographic changes that began to take place. Those factors converged to create real tensions between many church people and the College, which we have worked to ease over the decades since. But let me hasten to say there were many, many individuals and churches that continued to support the College through the turbulent '60s. We wouldn't be here otherwise.

Just as an aside, my dad was a barber in Summit, near McComb. Everybody sat in his chair sooner or later. He had to listen to a lot of politics he didn't agree with. And there were those that were just appalled that he was going to let his son come to Millsaps because that was right at the period when there began to be a lot of open, overt conflict over race. It had been much more subdued before then in my small town.

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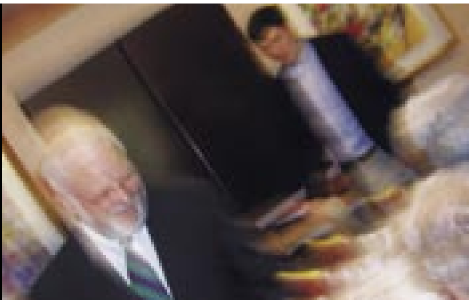


That must have been difficult for both you and your father.

My dad in his own quiet way supported my decision. It was really quite gutsy of him, given that these clients were his lifeblood. The best man at his wedding, who left the church over race, made it clear to Dad that he did not approve, and Dad managed to somehow absorb that and not interfere with my decision. I've always been grateful to him for that.

It has been said that you have an "implicit trust" in students, a challenge that they rise to, taking on enormous responsibility. Did growing up with an accepting, nonjudgmental father help you take on that role yourself?

There was a certain sort of nurturing that both my father and mother did. They were never among those people who were vocally hostile to African Americans and their push for justice. They were products of their age but implicitly knew that some of the violent practices and mindsets of their peers regarding race were not theirs. Theirs were the kind of paternalistic relationships that were characteristic of the more benevolent folks around, but interestingly they had strong relationships with the African Americans in Summit. It was evident when they died. That created a kind of permission not to get swept up in the kind of overt racism that was all too common.

You arrived at Millsaps at a watershed moment for civil rights.

Yes, but during the time I was here I was not involved in those issues in a public way. Issues of civil rights were not front and center for most students during my years as an undergraduate. They came to be much more public in the years immediately after I graduated. It was in the early 1950s that the College hosted the famous symposium series that included a program on race and religion that got such public outcry. By the time I got here that was a bit of history. The years I was here things were very conventional. It was in 1963, right after I graduated, that they had the famous confrontations in the Christian Center, where the group from Tougaloo came to a program and were turned away, and Eudora Welty made her insistence on open attendance at the Southern Literary Festival. I was already at divinity school at Duke by then. As soon as I got to Duke one of the first things I was confronted with was that one of the members of the faculty who was a Millsaps graduate had been arrested for protesting in Hillsborough, North Carolina. So I was suddenly confronted with this part of my history in a very different way and my beliefs began to take a more public shape and become more publicly expressed. I began to consciously realize that this was my history and this was what I wanted to address. I did not want to be just a silent partner to the kind of racism that I grew up with. Those began to be the years when my sense of calling related to race began to take shape.

How has that sense of calling manifested itself over the years?

In 1965–66 I served as assistant minister of a parish in Scotland, so I was removed from it; although interestingly enough while I was there I was called on time after time to speak to community groups, and inevitably they wanted me to speak on race in the United States. During that time I found myself having to once again interpret my history and decide who I was in that history.

In other words, out of context you were able to better define yourself.

It *reinforced* my thinking. When I would go to these audiences and talk to them and be confronted with such hard questions it really forced me to think through a range of issues and reinforced my own determination to see what I could do to help change the status quo when I got back here.

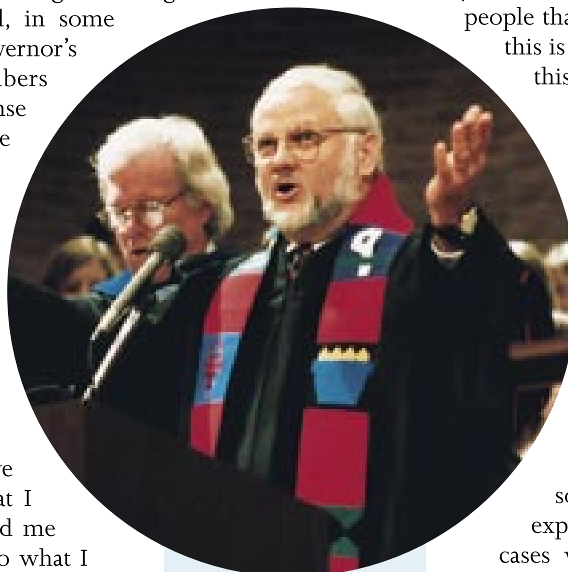
When you returned to Jackson in 1967, the civil rights movement was in full throttle.

I had returned to direct the youth ministry program of the Mississippi Conference and began to find ways for the young people who attended to discuss this issue. And there were still plenty of people who didn't want it discussed. At that point there was still what was called the Central Jurisdiction, the black jurisdiction, so the camps I would lead were all white. We had to find ways to create dialogue when there were no African-American kids in attendance. That's different now because that

Central Jurisdiction was integrated into other jurisdictions of the church, so now there are black and white kids at those camps. I also was here when the Jackson Public Schools were integrating and worked with leadership from other denominations: Catholic, Episcopal, and Presbyterian, to provide opportunities for kids to talk and prepare for the changes. This is also the period of very visible activism by members of the College community, 1967–72.

What part did you play in the "visible activism" of that era?

Part of what I found myself doing on behalf of the movement was trying to create a conversation about civil rights among the church folks I worked with. And, in some cases, as in the march around the Governor's Mansion in 1970 by over 200 members of the Millsaps community in response to the shooting deaths at Jackson State University, I tried to be an advocate for the College and to explain my own support and why I thought the church should be involved in the movement and provide leadership.



How did that period prepare you to deal with the problems that confront the campus today?

Being in Mississippi and being a firsthand witness to the movement gave a lot of direction and purpose to what I wanted to be. A lot of energy. It forced me to struggle with trying to be faithful to what I had come to believe was needed, the changes that were needed, the hypocrisy of our history, all the difficulties that were part of the movement for somebody that had grown up here. How do you put that together with a love for the institutions that you were serving? How do you reconcile those two? How do you be faithful to a sense that there are things that need to be said and done, but the institutions to which you're doing them stand to be impacted in some way?

I *loved* the Methodist church. I *loved* Millsaps College. It was painful for me to do anything that brought harm to them. At the same time I knew that the best of both of those institutions would be served by any of us doing what we believed was truthful and right. That in the long run it was serving the institutions more faithfully than trying not to say anything that would cause any repercussions.

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Were you worried about shaking the traditional foundations of the church?

It was broader than tradition. It was the very community that was those two institutions, the church and College. The people that were part of them, their history, what they had meant to so many for so many years, what their potential was at that point, what their potential was for the future: Those things were *buffeted* when people challenged the status quo. People took their money away. They left the church. They said terrible things about both institutions that were not true, out of anger. I was very aware of how the College had struggled in the 1960s to remain open, to survive. I knew the stakes were very high.

Why did you choose to stay on at Millsaps, where the stakes were indeed so high?

I simply loved the College. I loved what it stood for. I've loved its openness. I love watching what happens to people when they've been here and the way they've developed and grown and found whole new directions in their lives. That's always been wonderful. I love the intellectual stimulation that the College has brought the community and the state. I love the leadership in controversial areas that members of this community have provided over the years. A whole range of reasons. I've always found myself growing constantly just by being here. It's been a very stimulating place to work and a community of people that I've always loved. I really believe that this is a place that my talents fit. I can say that this is a place that God called me to.

Could you estimate, perhaps, just how many students' lives you have touched over the years?

I wouldn't know how to answer that. I don't even know what that would mean. What is so amazing to me in looking back is to realize how hard it is to assess at the moment what is meaningful to other people. When my daughter died last year, for instance, I got emails from people who reminded me of things that in some cases I didn't even remember and expressed gratitude for things that in some cases were not things I ever realized were taking place. I didn't know what those people most needed at that point. To hear their comments was gratifying and surprising.

I have always felt very strongly that I was on a pilgrimage, just like the students were. What I always wanted them to do was share their lives and what they were struggling with and looking for and hoping for, and I tried to let them be open to mine. I always learned from that.

It sounds as if you place yourself and the students on an equal footing.

In my work, I never imagined myself as a person who had answers that were to be given to the students. Part of what I always saw myself doing was trying to create as many different settings as possible where people could share with each other what was going on in their lives and often do that by talking about things that were happening in the society around them. When we would be talking about race or issues of sexuality or poverty or foreign policy or biblical interpretation or religious doctrines, what we were in fact always talking about was the efforts of people to find things that made their lives make sense and that gave them direction and focus, so that I always thought of myself as part of the conversation.

How did you conceive of the Campus Ministry Team?

The conventional model for doing campus ministry when I came in was that you have a group that meets on a regular basis and that group becomes the focus of your efforts. But I decided to

create some kind of structure that would be focused on ministry to the community and beyond because I felt strongly that the College is not isolated. And I would provide the structures through which people could address ministry at whatever level they were comfortable, and that there was no litmus test they had to pass to be involved. Thus the task groups that we now have working in the inner city, on Habitat for Humanity sites, and in other ways all over town. And they were for and on behalf of the larger Millsaps community.

How have the missions of those task groups evolved over the decades?

In the 1980s we had an active task group on apartheid in South Africa. We had one on children of divorced parents, because there was a lot of research at that time on how that was affecting generations; we had one on the nuclear freeze; we had support groups addressing various faith traditions; we had a task group on racial reconciliation; we had one on stress management. They would come and go as there were particular concerns and issues that seemed very pressing at that point.

They consisted exclusively of students?

They were student led, but the faculty and staff were often involved as resource people and panelists. My philosophy was that students could learn ministry by doing it.

Above, Dr. Fortenberry with Paige Henderson and Patrick Black, members of the Campus Ministry Team.

Do you think your trust in the students helped them find qualities of leadership in themselves?

I was always saying to them that there was no litmus test for them to be involved in the leadership except their interest, their willingness to work at it, and their openness to shape it in some helpful way. I'm sure some people were uncomfortable that I didn't say, "Now, what do you believe in?" before I put them in leadership. I always struggled with that.

It becomes a sort of spiritual empowerment, then.

You learn so much about how things work and who you are by doing it that way.

You can't plan something without having to deal with learning something about how you work with people, what's important to you, and how to communicate. AIDS awareness is an important issue and people agree with that. But how do you mobilize a community to address the issue? How do you create the energy? How do you come up with common goals without beating people over the head and saying, "You have to do it this way"?

Have you ever questioned the actions of a student task force?

There were times that I was very nervous about some of the leaders, but I was not willing to say to them they couldn't do it if I didn't agree with them.

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Say an AIDS task force began distributing condoms downtown.

Well, that's almost what happened. There was an off-campus but campuswide party, and the students on one of the CMT task groups said, "I'll tell you exactly what's going to be happening. They are all going to be drinking and many of them are going to get back to someplace where they can have sex." So they decided to distribute condoms at the party. I didn't know they were going to do that. Part of my job came to be helping people on campus—staff, students, faculty—who were very upset about that, and say: "You have to listen, let's be rational and think this through. Here's why they did it. Here's their perception of reality. And I realize that you may feel like that's not the way to deal with the AIDS problem, and that you may well think the route to go is abstinence." I was trying to help them process what happened.

It sounds as if the Campus Ministry Team has served as a catalyst for dialogue.

I remember one time a task force had planned a sexual orientation series. Over the years, Dr. Molly Wollick of the LSU Medical School in New Orleans brought in professional folks she had worked with who were openly gay or lesbian to talk about their experiences. The first time we had that was through a CMT task group. We had a professor from Southern Methodist University talk about the Bible and homosexuality. I got some very angry responses from people on campus who simply did not agree and felt we should not even talk about it. They didn't feel it was appropriate for a Christian college, as they put it, to sound like it was condoning homosexuality.

Do you feel the program has sometimes put you in a controversial position?

There have been those moments. But I have to tell you that what I have experienced over the years that so far outweighs anything like that is the kind of support of the faculty and staff here. It is just an amazing gift to be part of a community where people were willing to let issues be put on the table.

I experienced that most recently in a profound way when the Student Body Association sponsored an open conversation about whether it would support the resolution by some faculty on the constitutional amendment on marriage on the Mississippi ballot in the Nov. 2 election. It was really quite amazing to sit there—there were about a hundred people crammed into that room—and listen to the rational way the students dealt with that volatile issue. There was not one hostile remark made by one student to another. I kept waiting for the eruption. But it didn't happen. I think about other occasions I've witnessed where you knew there was no possibility of a conversation. It had turned into an armed camp where nobody would listen to anybody.

It seems that the CMT program has helped create a legacy on campus of respect for intellectual discourse, no matter how deeply divided people are.

It's a legacy that the CMT has helped continue. There have been people throughout the staff and the College who have nurtured that legacy. And the students by and large buy into that legacy. What you saw at the SBA gathering was the students demonstrating the legacy that they had either implicitly or explicitly bought into. I don't know what conversations they had had about the way discourse is supposed to take place, but they treated each other with respect. I know the feelings were very volatile and it could have just been a bloodbath.

If Millsaps is an environment where dialogue is encouraged, what is the most challenging conversation to have today, the most difficult issue facing the campus?

Having been through what we have been through in this country in the election, I think one of the most difficult issues might be the chasm that has developed between religion, morality, and politics. We have an electorate right now among whom many honestly believe that you cannot be a Christian and a Democrat. The election left a divided electorate. We are not a country that has any consensus about where we are or where we are going. If you could get right down to the real guts of people here, I think you would have a lot of anxiety and anger and frustration that is part of that issue.

So much is wrapped up in that conversation about the degree to which one's religious beliefs play in the formulation of public policy. Do you go to war because God told you to? Learning to understand a proper relationship between being a citizen of a nation with such a tremendous responsibility as the United States has in the world. How do you live that particular role and put it together with a role of personal faith? That is going to be a topic of ongoing conversation.

I've heard people say they were attacked by co-workers for supporting Kerry. It is hard to live in fear of the consequences of communicating honestly and authentically.

Or live duplicitously. There are all kinds of people who live that way. They don't want to get into overt conflict because they don't want to be battered to death. In the South, we've equated a kind of politeness with proper behavior. What it means to be a decent person does not allow you to be vocal and straightforward.

Yet Millsaps seems to merge that code of gentility with freedom of expression.

Yes. That's right. Millsaps is basically a pretty conservative place, which includes a kind of respect and politeness and unwillingness to be rude and demeaning to other people in the expression of how you feel about things. You do have an interesting blend of those things.

How many weddings and funerals have you attended?

It's incalculable. I try to go to as many as I can because I feel that presence is the greatest gift you can give. When a student loses a parent, even if I don't know the student, I want to be there if I possibly can because I want the student to see visible evidence of the caring that I want to be a part of this community. And the caring extends to trying to know as much as I can about the particulars of that person's life. One of the things that haunts me is how much I don't know about what happens to people, that some opportunity to have been supporting and caring in some way was missed—the same way not knowing students' names runs me crazy.

But you seem to know hundreds of names.

Sometimes I end up calling people by the wrong name. My wife gives me a hard time about that. But I think it's important for people to hear their name. And when you know somebody's name, sometimes you find relationships develop out of that. When they know they're important enough for you to know their name.

Likewise, your Community Concerns emails show your interest in the lives of those at Millsaps.

I've been doing it for years, since the onset of computer technology. Before that I couldn't possibly have sent out a notice everyday to everybody. I do it because I love the idea of a family, of a community that cares about people related to the community that you don't know well. I try to send out a name and then something that identifies them. That's why I do it. Because it's important to me that those people know that their names have been called in this community, that they're part of this community, that everybody knows their husband died, their brother died, they're in the hospital, they've got a granddaughter. I also do that for retired faculty and staff. Anytime something happens with one of their peers or somebody they know here, they get a written notice to keep them in touch with one another.

> "What I tried to do here was possible because it was Millsaps and because of the people who were here. I have no idea what my life would have been like if I had tried to do the same thing in some other place."

What would be your encouragement to those who would follow in your footsteps?

I would say, "Let me tell you all the gifts that a job like this would bring." I love the word "gifts" because I feel like that's really the way life is at its best. There are things we suddenly realize we took for granted, things that we didn't create but were privileged to be part of. I would say: "You need to process what your talents are, what your interests are, what you believe you want your life to be all about, what you feel 'called to' or 'inclined to.' If they coincide with this kind of life, let me tell you all of the things that could come to you as a result of working here."

And now there is the Don Fortenberry Scholarship, which may one day inspire a student to do just that. You were speechless, for a moment, at the luncheon where it was announced.

It totally took me by surprise. I thought, "This is something happening to somebody else." My thoughts wouldn't come together at that moment. What I tried to do here was possible because it was Millsaps and because of the people who were here. I have no idea what my life would have been like if I had tried to do the same thing at some other place. I have always been quite aware that it was the students and the faculty and the staff that I've worked with that made it possible to do the things we did because of the way they saw things. I'm in debt to them. ■