



The torch still burns

by RICK WOODALL (93C)

Anyone who believes the story of Berry Academy ended when the school closed in 1983 has never talked to someone who came of age in the shadow of Lavender Mountain. For those Berry alumni, places like the old Normandy Dairy, Meacham Hall and Frost Chapel still conjure up strong memories of their days as high school students on the mountain campus.

“Berry is very important, and it always will be for me,” said Tom Butler (65A), one of more than 1,700 living high school and academy alumni. “All I have to do is smell honeysuckle and certain hedge bushes, and I’m back there.”

Although many years now separate these alumni from their student experience, a growing number have returned to their roots. Some, like Berry Alumni Association President Frances Richey-Goldby (83A, 87C) and Director of Alumni Development Milton Chambers (78A, 82C), hold key leadership positions at the college. Others, like the members of the “Berry Breakfast Club,” have gotten involved at the grassroots level, working to reengage their classmates, many of whom remain disappointed about the decision to close the academy in the early 1980s.

“We’ve got some people with some very bitter feelings about the school closing, but I hope we can change that,” said Bob Williams (62H), a founding member of the Breakfast Club and the 2008 winner of the Berry Alumni Association’s Entrepreneurial Spirit Award. “It’s like eating an elephant. You’ve got to do it one bite at a time.”

John Shahan (64H, 69C), another member of the Breakfast Club, explained it this way: “We’re all part of the chain. We’re just links that were made at different times.”

The “chain” to which John refers found renewed strength during a 2007 tribute honoring former teacher and coach Jerry Shelton (58C). This event drew more than 100 attendees to Hill Dining Hall – among them W. Glenn Cornell (62C), chairman of the Berry College Board of Trustees, and Dr. Jerry Davis (61H), president of the College of the Ozarks. The success of this gathering opened the door for further engagement and spurred new efforts to strengthen the bond that high school and academy alumni feel with the Berry of today.

Evidence of this growing movement can be found in a variety of places, from the history exhibit planned for Oak Hill and The Martha Berry Museum to a Mountain Day

2008 all-academy reunion. A book project also is planned that will catalog this important period in Berry history.

Foundation for life

To grasp the complex feelings that many alumni have regarding the high school and academy years, it is important to understand the role that the institution played in their lives. Regardless of when they attended or under what name – the Martha Berry School for Girls closed in 1955-56; the Martha Berry School for Boys lived on until 1964, at which time the name was changed to Berry Academy – it was a place where opportunity was born and lifelong connections were made.

“The men and the women who were on the faculty up there – I don’t think they realized the magic they were doing,” Tom marveled. “They played a major role in my life.”

Bob voiced similar feelings. Like Tom, he lost his father at an early age, creating a need for a strong male role model in his life. He found that at Berry in the form of faculty and staff members like Jerry Shelton and headmaster Fred Loveday. Their guiding hand and steadying influence helped put him on a

path to future success, and today, he is the owner of a successful automobile dealership in Rome.

“People like Coach Shelton taught us that we could do whatever we set our minds to do,” Bob related. “Had it not been for him continually hammering that in our heads, I would have thrown my hands up with this business many a time and said, ‘To heck with it – I’m going home.’”

Such lessons weren’t reserved for the students. Barely 22 when he began his teaching career in 1958, Jerry spent the most formative years of his professional life on the high school campus.

“By and large, what I was as a professional was formed during that first 1-2 years at the high school,” Jerry stated.

John also came of age as a young professional on the academy campus. Unlike Jerry, however, John grew up there as well, arriving as a teenager in the summer of 1960 and immediately going to work clearing away broken limbs from an ice storm the previous spring. He wanted to leave after his first year, but a conversation with Mr. Loveday helped convince him to remain. He wound up staying for 17 years, graduating from student to teacher at both the academy and the college.

Over the course of those 17 years, many indelible memories were formed. Harking back to his time as a student, John still recalls chasing rabbits in the tall grass behind Frost Chapel. Later, as a faculty member and dorm supervisor, he was on the receiving end of the same sorts of pranks that – once upon a time – he had pulled as a student.

“Oh man, we were always trying to pull pranks on that guy,” John recalled of his own dorm supervisor. “And now they were doing it to me.”

Jokes aside, John still cherishes the time he spent on the mountain campus as both a student and a teacher, noting simply, “It was home to me.”

Back in the fold

For many alumni, that sense of “home” ceased to exist when the academy was closed. Conflicting feelings of pride in their alma mater and frustration about the decision to

close the school have been commonplace ever since.

Such feelings don’t dissipate overnight, but Tom and others see evidence that the relationship is improving, thanks in part to efforts by the alumni relations staff and Berry President Steve Briggs, who has met with several members of the Breakfast Club and also attended a recent high school reunion.

“I’m at an age where I’m very realistic,” Tom said. “I know that the school closed for financial reasons. One of the purposes for our group is to heal the angry feelings we all felt from the closing of the school and help all of us reconnect to Berry.”

Frances Richey-Goldby has the same goal. A native of Spain, she arrived on campus in 1979, eight years after the academy became co-ed, and wound up being a member of the last official graduating class (several students finished up in 1984, after the school closed). In the years since graduation, she has worked hard to remind alumni of her generation that good work is still being done on the Berry campus.

“It’s the same philosophy of education,” she explained.

Points of pride

The pride felt by high school and academy graduates is undeniable. For evidence of this, look no further than the unofficial academy Web site started by Jack Pigott (69A) at www.geocities.com/reunionfor1969, which provides visitors with the opportunity to relive the school’s glory days (including the seven-overtime game won by the boys basketball team to clinch a berth in the 1965 state tournament) and share memories of their own.

For Bob, that pride extends to the work that has been done to preserve the Normandy Dairy – now the national-award-winning WinShape Retreat – and other facilities on the mountain campus.

“At least we have our school,” he said. “We can go back and we can still sit in Hill Dining Hall, and that’s a great feeling. We can go back and visit Meacham and

Friendship. We can go back to the dairy now and sit down and eat a meal where we used to milk cows. We still have that stuff, and they have preserved it.”

As John sees it, the same spirit that permeated the academy campus in his day lives on in the college students who now walk those old familiar trails and inhabit the same facilities.

“The mountain campus is alive and full of energy,” he stated. “They’re leaving their footprints, just like we did.”

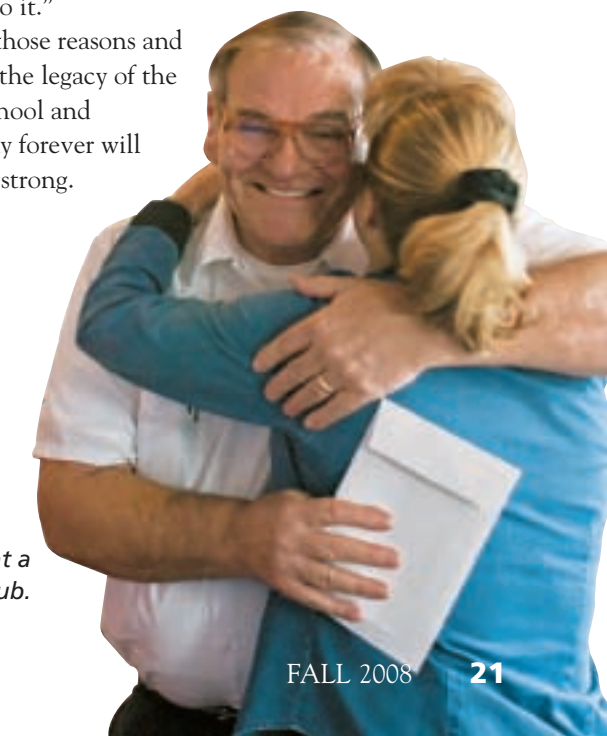
Leaving a legacy

For the Breakfast Club members and other high school and academy alumni, a common sentiment is that the history of those days needs to be preserved so that future generations won’t forget the life-changing work that went on there.

Asked what he would say to those who never had the opportunity to experience the high school or academy themselves, Tom responded, “I would want people today and in the future to understand that the administrators at Berry High School/Academy put together a team of people who themselves captured the true spirit and mission of Martha Berry.

“Because the people there believed in us, we learned to believe in ourselves,” he added. “We learned to understand our self worth, we learned how to work hard and we learned that we could do anything if we put our minds to it.”

For those reasons and others, the legacy of the high school and academy forever will remain strong.



Frances Richey-Goldby hugs Bob Williams at a meeting of the Berry Breakfast Club.