

ROBERT FURE 00:00

Well, let me tell you this before we begin, this is my favorite subject, talking about Lifelong Learning, and all that we do together, so this should be fun.

Ruth Candler 00:30

Thanks for tuning in to W&L after Class. *I'm your host, Ruth Candler.*

Today is an unusual and exciting podcast for me for two reasons. First - It's the 30th episode of our Lifelong Learning podcast. We've enjoyed four seasons of great conversations with W&L's expert faculty.

The second reason I'm excited about today's conversation is that it's with Rob Fure who has been Washington and Lee's director of Lifelong Learning for 42 years. Rob has also been my boss for a little over 4 of those 42 years! When he announced his retirement, it seemed a natural fit – to have a conversation about his work, the mission of W&L's office of lifelong learning, and the years leading up to where we are today.

Rob retires from the university after 46 years, having arrived at W&L in 1977 as an English Professor. He has served in his current role since 1981, when then-President Huntley - authorized the creation of what was called the Office of Summer Programs.

The Office of Lifelong Learning currently offers a diverse array of educational programs for alumni, parents, and friends of the university. These initiatives include our virtual programs, like the podcast you're listening to now, our Alumni College series –three weekend seminars during the academic year along with our summer programs, and W&L's travel program, educational tours traveling around the world.

Rob, it is an honor and an absolute joy to welcome you to W&L After Class.

ROBERT FURE 02:30

Thank you. Glad to be here.

Ruth Candler 02:32

So, we're recording this conversation on a *very* monumental day. While you don't officially retire until June 30, today is your last day in the office. How are you feeling?

ROBERT FURE 02:48

Well, I must say. It's a little strange to look at all these empty bookcases, and now to gaze into empty drawers, and the space on the wall where my clock used to be. I'm excited about the next chapter. But of course, I have a lot of feelings about what I'm leaving behind.

Ruth Candler 03:12

I'm sure. Well, I've known you for quite a while. I'd like for our listeners to learn a little more about you. You were an Iowa boy who eventually got a PhD from Berkeley. How did you get to W&L?

ROBERT FURE 03:31

I often tell my friends that my values were formed in Iowa. I did have an Iowa boyhood, which is baseball, corn fields, and family trips in a Pontiac station wagon. As a boy, my family, of course, followed

my father's career, and much of it was spent in Iowa. I did go on to high school in suburban Chicago, and then to college in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

I was fortunate, at the end of my college career, to have a choice between two very fine graduate schools. I chose Berkeley over Harvard because of the weather, basically. I wanted to live on the West Coast - I liked it. This was during the late 60s, so, an exciting time to be young. And Berkeley was a hub of a lot of social and political ferment, but it was also the best graduate school in English Literature at the time. And so, I was I was very fortunate to do my graduate work in Berkeley across the bay from San Francisco. I was also fortunate at the end of that long period to get a job. During the 70s there was a PhD under every rock in America - probably because of the Vietnam War - a lot of people went to graduate school.

Then I got a job in the perfect place for me; a small, excellent liberal arts college that gave me an opportunity to teach at all levels of the curriculum. It's true that the chairman of the department was fond of reminding me that I was one of 600 applicants for the job, but I was able, eventually, to ignore that kind of warning. I loved teaching, I enjoyed my students very much, and I had some terrific opportunities.

It's interesting, tracing my background in Iowa, that when I came to Washington and Lee, I met Clark Mollenhoff, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who was teaching in the Journalism Department. He heard that I had grown up in Iowa, and he said, "Let's have lunch." So, one day we went out. Clark had earned his Pulitzer Prize working for the Des Moines Register. He asked me where I lived in Iowa, and I said, I lived in several different towns, but most of the time I lived in Webster City, Iowa. "Webster City," he exclaimed, "that's where I'm from!" Webster City is a town of 8000 people.

Ruth Candler 06:41

Wow.

ROBERT FURE 06:43

So, we talked about Webster City, Iowa and The Daily Freeman Journal - which he used to write for, and I used to deliver as a boy - and he asked me, where in where in Webster City did I live? And I said, I lived on Boone street. "Boone Street?! I lived on Boone Street! Whom did you know on Boone Street?" (he said) So, I said, I knew the Schrader's and the Vance's, and Sheriff Lear lived down the street. And he says, "Well, we knew the same people. Where did you live on Boone Street?" And I said, I lived at 840, Boone Street, he says, "840 Boone Street. That's where I lived." We lived in the same house. And we went out to lunch because we were from the same state.

Ruth Candler 07:30

That's bizarre.

ROBERT FURE 07:32

Later that year, we were at a Christmas party together. There was a visiting law professor from the University of Florida who brought with him his wife, who was Sheriff Lear's daughter, who lived down the street, on Boone street. So yeah, small world.

Ruth Candler 07:45

Yeah, you can't make that up. Small world.

ROBERT FURE 07:52

So, while I was at Washington and Lee, teaching in the English department, I was fortunate to be selected as one of four faculty to teach in a program that led to the next stage of my career, which was Lifelong Learning.

Ruth Candler 08:12

So, let's talk about the early days of the Office of Lifelong Learning and how the office evolved. Would you tell us about the first program and how that developed into the Alumni College series?

ROBERT FURE 08:26

Well, let me tell you a little bit about how the office was created. I was teaching in the English Department, as I mentioned, and I was very fortunate to be selected as one of four faculty by the President, who at that time with Bob Huntley. We put together a two-week program, a summer program in the humanities, for *corporate executives*; a very unusual concept in terms of executive development. This was Shakespeare and Plato and Herman Melville, Robert Frost, for corporate executives who are moving from fairly narrow technical backgrounds, into policy making or policy advocacy positions. And we had a program that would give them two weeks of literature and philosophy, in other words, a healthy dose of ambiguity, which they may have missed in their college or graduate education. I was one of four faculty. Two were from the English Department, one was from religion, and one was from philosophy. I loved that teaching experience. As you may know, teaching is a lonely enterprise. But this was team teaching. I worked with three brilliant colleagues who were superb in the classroom, and just great fun to be with. I was also teaching \* adults \*, very bright people who represented in my view, a lot of life experience; life experience that I hadn't had, and brought a lot more of intelligence and experience to works in literature and philosophy that we were discussing. It was an exhilarating experience for me. I did that for a couple of years, and then came up with an idea that we could do more of this sort of thing: Summer programs involving teen teaching, along with adult audiences. I put together an administrative structure for a new office that would pursue that kind of educational experience. And to my surprise and delight, Bob Huntley said, "Well, you thought of it, you do it." Here's an office. Here's a secretary, (as we call them back then). And while you're doing that, we have an increasing number of summer programs, conferences, sport camps, there was a Summer Scholars Program, that's a program for rising high school seniors. These programs needed a kind of administrator. And so, he said, if you would do that, you can play around with some new ideas for programs such as you're describing.

Ruth Candler 11:51

What fun.

ROBERT FURE 11:53

So, that was 1981.

Ruth Candler 11:54

And that was the birth of our on-campus programs. How did that lead to the development of our travel program?

ROBERT FURE 12:03

Well, the travel program emerged from our Alumni Colleges. The first program I created was the Alumni College, and that was in 1982. That program was successful at the very beginning. Here, again, it was a

program in the humanities, we called it *Changing Views And Changing Times*. The program was so popular that we had to close the door at 40 people; we thought that would be the maximum we could accommodate. And so, the following year, we had three Alumni Colleges. And the year after that, 1984, one of the three programs that we offered was an Elizabeth in England Program with the art, literature and history of Elizabeth in England. While we were doing that program, we thought, why don't we actually go to the place after we have taken this or produced this course. So, we got in touch with someone, an alum who is involved in travel, and he put together an itinerary for us. We offered it to the people who were in the Alumni College campus experience, most of the places on that trip were taken by the people who had attended the Summer off campus program. And so, in 1985, we did our first trip, the Alumni College abroad, we call it back then, again, we had a full enrollment. So, we thought, *this is a great idea*. Let's do one of the Alumni Colleges every year, we'll focus on an international destination. And then we will go to the country the year after we have that program. Well, it was successful year after year. So, by 1990, five years after that first program, the alumni director at that time said, "You seem to be having a lot of success with these travel programs. Would you like to do all of the trips that W&L offers to alumni?" And I agreed to do that. And I said but all of them are going to involve be educational, educational travel, we're not going to do golf trips. We're not going to do shopping trips. We're going to do programs that focus on the history and the culture of the destination. And it's likely that we will have a faculty member travel with our alumni. And he said, "Well, you've had success with it. I'd appreciate it if you took it over." And so, since 1990, we have done all of the alumni travel programs for Washington and Lee.

Ruth Candler 15:05

The office has gone through several name changes over the years. Tell us how it evolved from Summer Programs, to Special Programs, to Lifelong Learning, and the significance of that in terms of its focus and its mission.

ROBERT FURE 15:23

Well, obviously, since we were offering travel programs, we were operating all year long – it's not just activities that occur in the summer. We also expanded the Alumni College to include weekend seminars. It began with a weekend seminar in theater, taking advantage of our theater department's schedule of plays. That quickly morphed into other weekend seminars; the first one was a Law and Literature program. Later on, we developed in response to the class of 1951, a weekend seminar featuring literature by current writers under the rubric of the Tom Wolfe weekend seminar. Later on, we created a program Institute for Honors Symposium, again, in response to a particular class, class of 1960s gift to hold that weekend seminar every year. So, from 'Summer,' we moved to the Office of 'Special' Programs. Later on, it became that the burden of administrating all of these programs in Lifelong Learning became rather more than our staff could handle comfortably. So, the University created an office of special events that would handle sport camps and conferences - programs outside of our main portfolio, which is educational programs for alumni, parents and friends. And so, the title of the office was changed one more time to the Office of Lifelong Learning. And that's what we are today.

Ruth Candler 17:23

Thank you for bringing us up to date on that. You know, you have a story that I think really illustrates *how* our Lifelong Learning programs can evolve. Would you share the story of Alexey Yablokov?

ROBERT FURE 17:40

Oh, yes, that's a that's a very pleasant memory. When we were also administering conferences on campus, we served, one year, a conference organized by the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's a government agency. They chose the campus of Washington and Lee to meet with a number of fish and wildlife experts from the United States. They were meeting with a delegation from the Soviet Union; a delegation headed by a man named Alexey Yablokov. He was a scientist, an ecologist from the Soviet Union. They met here and during their two-week conference, I got to know Alexey Yablokov, and I asked him - he spoke perfectly good English - I asked him if he would be willing to return to Washington and Lee the following summer, to help us with a program that we were already organizing on the history of Russia. And he said, "All I need is a letter from you, and I hope I can get permission to come back to the United States. But I have to have an invitation." So, we went through all of that administrative process, and he came back, and he was a wonderful addition to our faculty helping us understand the history of Russia and the Soviet Union that day. Well, during that year, there was a lot of turmoil in the Soviet Union, and as you may recall, it finally dissolved in 1989. But he was still able to come to campus. And so, the following year, when we went to Russia, again, following this model is studying on campus one summer and then within the coming year, going to the country of interest. We went to Russia, and while we were in Moscow, he invited us to his Kremlin office. Yes, he had an office in the Kremlin, because he had become Yeltsin's secret Secretary of the Interior.

Ruth Candler 18:05

That must've been a very surreal experience.

ROBERT FURE 18:07

Going into the Spassky gate, you know, getting through all that security clearance and then going up to his Kremlin office. And while we were there, something amazing happened. We went to his inner sanctum, the *big office*. We each had a bottle of Pepsi Cola, because that's what they gave people as refreshments. And we looked at a map that he had on his wall, a huge wall size map, and on that map were several large black dots in Siberia. And we asked him, what did those signify? He looked at us and said, "Chernobyl was nothing," in comparison to the areas of the Soviet Union and the areas of Siberia that were permanently uninhabitable because of nuclear waste dumps. So that was - it was not only a sort of diplomatic friendly meeting - it was an eye-opening experience to some of the problems facing Russia today.

Ruth Candler 21:16

Yeah. And you know, you could read about that in a book, but, but standing in that location and experiencing that firsthand, must have been amazing. Thank you for sharing that, I never get tired of that story.

I want to turn back to the first Alumni College program that you mentioned, Changing Views and Changing Times. You mentioned that it was such a hit, it sold out quickly. You had some W&L legends on your faculty team at that time, and I thought it'd be fun to take a walk down memory lane for our alumni and have you share so there are names?

Robert Fure 21:54

Well, that, of course was the key to the popularity of the program. The faculty that we had teaching in the program, were giants; Sidney Cowling, Bill Jenks in the history department, Lynn Girard in psychology, along with some younger faculty, Tom Nye in biology, and John Handelman in politics. Five

faculty who, who worked hard with me in organizing a program over five days that would focus on changing views and changing times. They were superb, and they gave us such a great launch, that we've used all of those faculty since then. In fact, well, Sid Cowling, of course was chairman of the English department. So that gave me the exquisite pleasure of hiring my former employer.

Ruth Candler 22:58

Getting a feeling for how that goes right now!

Robert Fure 23:00

Yeah, he was wonderful. And I took Bill Jenks and Sid Cowling on trips, even Lynn Gerard, so they helped us both with campus programming and also our travel programs.

Ruth Candler 23:16

Thank you for sharing those names. I'm sure you put a smile on many, many faces of our alumni.

Robert Fure 23:21

Wonderful People

Ruth Candler 23:22

We've used the motto a good education is a habit of mind. Why is Lifelong Learning so important to our alumni in the university?

Robert Fure 23:34

Well, that motto, may defy understanding, but think about it for a moment. What do you really get out of a good education? You get a continuing desire to learn, and intellectual curiosity that is inextinguishable. So, I think the motto is apt for Lifelong Learning. We assume that people who attend our programs have a college education. They've had a good education, certainly if they've attended Washington and Lee. And so, we naturally assume they want to continue exploring history, literature, the arts, social issues, political issues, but they want to do so with expertise, the expertise that we can provide, through our own faculty, and those faculty from other institutions, whom we can invite the campus to facilitate that continuing adventure and learning.

Ruth Candler 24:42

Let's take that a step further. Why are these types of immersive educational experiences - whether they involve traveling abroad or bringing the world to Lexington - why are they such an integral part of our mission, and what are the unique benefits of this approach?

Robert Fure 25:00

Why do we offer these programs to people? We want them first of all, we want our audience to experience the university again firsthand. The University *is* the university faculty. These are the agents of learning - of education. We want our alumni to experience the faculty *today*. Of course, they remember fondly their professors when they were students here, but the university faculty is always evolving. And it has been a wonderful growth at this university. We have a superb teaching faculty. It's not primarily a research faculty, although most faculty do research, but the faculty who teach here are still here because they're proven to be good teachers. And we like to show them off; we like to make them available to our former students, but also to our parents. I'm a college student parent, my daughter is going away to college this fall, and I am curious about the people she is going to have in the classroom. I would like to have more experience with those people, I'd like to see what it's

all about; what is teaching and learning at Vassar College? (This is where she's going.) So, I know that curiosity, but also as a lifelong learner myself, I want to continue the adventure however I can - at Washington and Lee, or anywhere else it gives me that opportunity.

Ruth Candler 26:53

Thank you, because one of my questions was to ask you about the benefits to W&L parents, so, I appreciate that. I want to bring us back to faculty, though; some folks may be surprised to know that faculty development is also at the heart of what our office provides. Would you describe the professional development opportunities for faculty through our programs and how they've evolved over the years?

Robert Fure 27:17

Now, I'm glad you asked that question, Ruth, because it takes me all the way back to that conversation that I had with Bob Huntley in 1981. When I talked, we discussed this idea of a program like an Alumni College for our faculty, and what I had learned through teaching in the Institute for executives, he said that the principal benefit of these programs will not be fundraising – which was odd to hear. It will not necessarily be alumni relations, which of course, they would be of benefit. But the principal benefit, he said, would be faculty development. What a curious notion; that somehow, this audience of adult learners, and this opportunity to teach in a team, rather than all alone, would help faculty develop intellectually, and would help them develop deeper understanding of their subject, through discussions with people who had abundant life experience. That has certainly proven to be the case; faculty line up to teach in Alumni College. They enjoy the experience of teaching with their colleagues, of discussing subjects in History and Literature and Philosophy and the arts with people who bring so much more to the classroom than typical undergraduates, they bring life experience. That is healthy. You've heard me say before that teaching is a lonely enterprise. You're all alone with your students. But, if you are working with faculty from other disciplines, working with other informed perspectives, as you consider a work of literature, for example, or an era of history -- it is deeply enriching. I remember that one of those years, I was teaching in the Institute for executives, I taught the Shakespeare play Antony and Cleopatra, which if you know, the play, it's essentially about an office romance. Anthony is messing around with Cleopatra, instead of running the Roman Empire. In my class, in that institute for executive classroom, there were executives who knew exactly what Shakespeare was talking about. They had seen it, they had lived it. They knew the hazard of messing around with the Cleopatra, but they also knew the allure of it. That's what I mean by life experience brought to the topic of literature.

Ruth Candler 30:18

So, perhaps, an undergraduate student wouldn't have that life experience(?)

Robert Fure 30:23

Exactly. I mean, what are the principal themes of literature? Love and death. But when you have an adult in the classroom, they have lived that experience. And they have things to say about it a lot more than young people.

Ruth Candler 30:23

Thank you for sharing the origins and the history of the Office of Lifelong Learning. I'd like to turn our focus a bit and talk about you. You have accomplished much during your tenure here at Washington and Lee. As you embark on your retirement, what are you most proud of as you reflect on your career?

Robert Fure 31:09

Well, I don't think about that very much. But, if I have to, I think I'm very proud of the service that we have provided to our constituents, our alumni, parents and friends. I'm very proud of the service, we provide to our faculty, giving them new kinds of teaching opportunities, getting better acquainted, not only with their colleagues here at Washington and Lee, but with expertise outside of the university, whether it's from other universities, or from the alumni sector itself. I'm also proud of what we've done for the university. We have a national reputation in Lifelong Learning, many universities call us for ideas in Lifelong Learning. But we've also helped the university build new relationships with alumni and parents, and I think that it's been healthy.

Ruth Candler 32:17

It's a lot to be proud of.

Robert Fure 32:19

Yeah, this is a relationship business. And I'm happy that we've had a lot of success building and strengthening those relationships.

Ruth Candler 32:28

Well, you've traveled to all seven continents, so I think it's easier for me to ask where you haven't been than where you have?

Robert Fure 32:36

Yes, I've, I've been to all seven continents and over 100 countries, I've traveled a long way beyond Boston. As an American literature professor, I didn't think I'd get beyond Boston. But, to my surprise and delight I've been around the world a few times, haven't been to Mongolia, haven't been to New Guinea haven't been to the "-stans" you know, Pakistan, Uzbekistan. But there is not a single place that I would not happily go back to. I have had a splendid education through my career of Lifelong Learning. It has helped me to see the world, to understand the world better, and above all, to share it with others.

Ruth Candler 33:27

It's a great feeling. So, Mongolia, New Guinea or the "-stans", are any of them on your bucket list.

Robert Fure 33:37

I think there's a reason that we haven't been to those places quite yet. Certainly, the "-stans." It's a little dicey these days.

Ruth Candler 33:46

I've heard you describe your fascination of different locations around the world. And Rob, I may have even heard you contradict yourself once or twice on what your favorite is.

Robert Fure 33:57

I contain multitudes. So, I contradict myself.

Ruth Candler 34:00

I think I know the answer, but I'm going to put you on the spot so that you're on record. If you had to pick just one destination as your favorite, what would it be?



Robert Fure 34:10

You're asking me to choose among my grandchildren, Ruth. It's very, very difficult to do that. But let me say this. I have been to Egypt eight times. There's a reason for that. I have been to on a safari in East Africa almost as many times. I have been to Antarctica once, and I am looking for another opportunity to return. The beauty of Antarctica, the vitality of that continent with its teeming with wildlife, but also the vividness of the history of Egypt, of the Nile kingdoms preserved by the desert and the astounding variety of wildlife in East Africa, along with the human culture, they're endlessly fascinating. As you know, I've just returned from a private family safari to East Africa.

Ruth Candler 35:20

And it's where you met your wife.

Robert Fure 35:22

Yes, it is. My wife and I promised each other that one day we would return. And so, for our 20th anniversary, my wife presented me with this trip

Ruth Candler 35:35

and how wonderful you're able to bring your children and your grandkids.

Robert Fure 35:39

Yes. Two children and two of our grandchildren came with us.

Ruth Candler 35:45

So, this may or may not be the same answer for you. But if someone were to ask you to give them one place in this world they must visit. What would you say?

Robert Fure 35:57

I guess I would ask them to take a chance and visit where it all began, which is East Africa. There's something about the fenceless immensity of the Serengeti — something about the purity of that life, that atmosphere, that landscape, — that is transformative. There's a reason why people go back, once they've been, they go back to East Africa, just to breathe, and to see that wonder, the splendid horizontals of the place, and the diversity of the wildlife. It's yeah, I recommend it. I hope that we continue to offer a safari, at least every other year, through Lifelong Learning.

Ruth Candler 37:02

It's a wonderful experience. You know, it's funny when I was when I was contemplating these questions, I played a game with myself, I really thought you were going to say, *Egypt*.

So, you've spent your entire professional career at Washington and Lee and all but a few of those developing educational programs for alumni, parents and friends of the university. What do you hope for your legacy to be?

Robert Fure 37:33

Well, I think the legacy of this office is assured by the great staff we have in this office,

Ruth Candler 37:41

I didn't pay you to say that.

Robert Fure 37:42

It's true! I mean, that's the most critical decision an administrator makes is staffing. And we have a superb team in this office. And frankly, that's, that's another reason that I'm a little sad to be leaving, because I've so enjoyed working with the people in this office. And I look forward to the to the new era, the new director, and I hope that the legacy of relationships that we have built over the years with alumni and with our parents, friends, as well as the staff here at Washington, Lee will assure the continuing vitality of this enterprise. It is really the best job in the world. Well, you know, this is my last day in the office. But I'm still working until June.

Ruth Candler 38:41

Oh, I know. I know. Okay, so in a few hours, you're going to be walking out your office door for the last time. You once told me that I am keen on getting the last word. In honor of your retirement. I'd like for you to end our podcast with parting words for our lifelong learners.

Robert Fure 39:04

Well how about this, it's not very profound, but my parting word is -- See you later. I am a lifelong learner, and I live two blocks from campus. I'm going to enjoy coming to campus, I hope I will be able to attend the Alumni College if I sit in the back row-

Ruth Candler 39:37

We laugh with duct tape on your mouth -

Robert Fure 39:39

Yes, with duct tape on my mouth, I don't say anything. I have told you this is a relationship business. I want to continue to see the friends I've made in these programs, and I want to continue to know these wonderful teachers that we have on our staff. This is a wonderful place and I'm not leaving — I'm just not getting paid. So, I think the best thing is, best thing to say is I'll be there. I'll see you later. And let's keep let's keep on doing this.