

## SPECIAL REPORT



## Dear future Dukes

*An open letter to all high-school seniors* BY ANDY PERRINE ('86)

**W**hat is really weird is that when I was 18 years old people in their 40s seemed old. I understand now how utterly wrong I was. That was 28 years ago this fall, and I am still as hip and cool as I was back then. Sure, some things have changed: I no longer have acne, and I have a car and a girl who likes me. OK, maybe I am actually cooler now.

As a freshman at Madison in the fall of 1981, everything seemed possible to me. Going to college was exciting, and my arrival on campus was a speedy blur. Back then we lived our lives without cell phones, the World Wide Web and Red Bull. That world may not seem anything like the world you live in today. But, just like you the pace of change seemed fast to me back then when something new named MTV launched just as school began and made concentrating on my studies an even greater challenge, when President Ronald Reagan fired 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, when an era ended after the great Muhammad Ali lost badly in what would be his final fight against Trevor Berbick, and when the last hippies vanished as thin neckties and mullet haircuts became cool as punk yielded to new wave.

Madison was a much different place then. Only about half the number of students attended JMU then as attend today; campus had not yet grown to straddle Interstate 81 and gaining admission to the university was far easier, hence my thick envelope. Only kidding. Actually, I got into most of the good schools I applied to, so I had my choice. But when I visited the JMU cam-

pus during fall of my senior year, I fell in love with the place. An intangible spirit and atmosphere exists at Madison that I didn't feel on any other campus. It's difficult to describe, but I guarantee you there are alumni reading this column right now nodding and thinking, "Yep, me too." It's a story I've heard from fellow Dukes now hundreds of times.

My very first class freshman year was Introduction to Oceanography in Miller Hall with geology professor Stan Ulanski. The subject had an exotic allure to me and even though the class met at 8 a.m., I was excited. As I sat down in the large lecture hall and took in the scene before class, a mixture of fear and daring overtook me — I realized that I was now utterly gone from home for the first time, but that I was about to embark on a mysterious undersea adventure with Dr. Ulanski. As I emptied the contents of my backpack onto my folding desktop, the fresh promise that only new blank notebooks can inspire elevated my anticipation.

Ulanski (who we'd later fondly refer to as "Stan the man") began his lecture. Suddenly I knew that my world indeed had changed. I'd had good teachers before and can still name the ones who inspired me in grade school. But Ulanski was another species of teacher. He was so into what he was teaching. Despite ourselves, all of us freshmen leaned forward drawn by his enthusiasm for the subject. He was brilliant and hilarious, he asked us hard questions, he jumped around — he even threw an eraser at a kid who was reading a newspaper in the back row and righteously scared the daylights out of him. I was officially in heaven.

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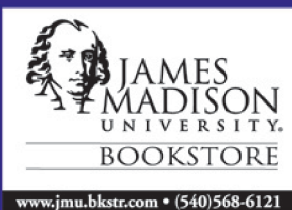
I didn't know then that unlike a lot of other universities, most classes at Madison — even the ones offered to dazed freshmen — are taught by Ph.D. faculty members instead of graduate students; not that there's anything wrong with graduate students. But the reason I clearly recall my first class at Madison after 28 years is that Dr. Ulanski switched on the true and lasting light of intellectual curiosity in me.

Now I am not saying that everything at Madison was la-la land after that. I struggled in some classes. I made a few dumb personal choices. But still, with this new light switched on in my head, I looked deeper and more thoughtfully at everything I encountered in and out of class. It was the beginning of a new and lasting worldview that has made my life far more meaningful than it would have been otherwise.

My only regret from my days as a student was that I didn't take more advantage of everything Madison offered me. In fact, when asked in surveys to reflect on their Madison Experience alumni often say they wish they had attended more lectures and wish they were more involved in campus activities. Your college days may be the only time in your life that you can totally immerse yourself in the wonderful life of the mind. No matter where you choose to attend college please completely engage in what your university has to offer. You'll never regret it. I hope that Facebook will not suck away as much of your precious time as MTV did mine.

By the way, professor Ulanski is still on the Madison faculty. He may not jump around as much as he did when I was a student, but take a course from him if you can. **MI**

**GEAR FOR TAILBACKS.  
AND TAILGATERS.**



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