

PROFESSORS YOU LOVE

A legacy of respect

I help my students find their voice thanks to William McMurray's lessons

BY CASEY CARTER ('70, '73M, '81M)

When I first arrived at Madison College from a small-town high school I was sure of only two things: I was very fortunate to be able to continue my education on academic scholarships, and I knew that I wanted to major in my favorite subject, English.

My family taught me the value and importance of education, and my excellent teachers at Lexington High School [Lexington, Va.] helped me develop a respect and love for literature.

I was delighted and somewhat overwhelmed to find that the Madison College Department of English included brilliant, dedicated educators who loved to share their knowledge and expertise with students. I was inspired to learn from professors like Dr. Frank Adams, Dr. Frances Cavanaugh, Dr. Louis Locke, Dr. Andrew Mahler, Dr. Geoffrey Morley-Mower, Dr. Helen Swink and Dr. James Poindexter.

One of this distinguished group of educators — Dr. William McMurray — was the quintessential professor of English. He was dignified and professional in the classroom. His genuine respect for his subject matter was immediately apparent to anyone fortunate enough to be in his class. He helped me and countless others understand, appreciate and embrace the rich literary heritage of our country.

In his early American literature classroom, I learned about the Puritan spirit, the influence of the American frontier on our literature and the limited but powerful role of American women in the early development of our country's literature.

Dr. McMurray's calm, classic approach in the classroom added dignity and respect to the many young voices in the literature we studied. He gave equal attention to the poets, novelists, politicians, clergy and everyday citizens who shaped the voice and experience of this grand experiment in democracy.

About the Professor Professor Emeritus of English William J. "Bill" McMurray served on the Madison English faculty from 1965 to 1992 and served as department head. His wife, Mary Gaines McMurray ('78M), earned a master's in reading education and worked in the JMU reading lab for many years. The couple lives in Harrisonburg and in 1995 established the William J. and Mary G. McMurray Scholarship. The award provides financial assistance to English majors studying English and/or American literature.

When I enrolled in JMU's graduate program in English, I again had the opportunity to learn from Dr. McMurray — not just factual knowledge, but powerful life lessons, as well. One day in class I answered a question from Dr. McMurray with what I knew to be an adequate, if uninspired response. He paused to consider my answer and then quietly, but firmly, told me that he would look forward to an explanation and justification of my answer in our next class.

After I got over the initial shock, I set out to substantiate my answer. I found so much more than my previous "acceptable" response. Life lesson learned. Late that night I concluded that I had been taught a number of valuable lessons. My opinion had been received and respected in front of the class even though Dr. McMurray knew that the quality of the response was subpar. I had been given the opportunity to support my opinion and prove my statement. While he must have known what I would find, he gave me the space and courtesy to express myself. He was willing to consider my answer — he invited me to teach him. I went to the next class and presented what I had found. Dr. McMurray was gracious and respectful. He listened intently and thanked me for my work. I learned how to push myself, to not settle and how to treat others.

Over the years I have remembered that day in class and many other interactions with Dr. McMurray. I try to emulate his style when I work with students as a teacher and adviser. I honor his legacy of respecting all opinions. In the tradition of the superb faculty of the Madison College and JMU College of Arts and Letters English department, my goal as an educator is to assist others as they find their own voices. I also wish to respect the right and power of the mind of each individual student. I am grateful to Dr. William McMurray and the English department faculty for my lessons in how to learn. **M**

About the Author Casey Carter ('70, '73M, '81M) is an associate athletics director for JMU Student Athlete Services. She lives in Harrisonburg and serves as an academic counselor and adviser to student-athletes in the JMU Plecker Athletics Center. She earned her JMU undergraduate degree in English, cum laude, and was a member of Zeta Tau Alpha. She later earned two master's degrees in education management and counselor education at JMU. She is a member of the Duke Club and the President's Council.

Casey Carter ('70, '73M, '81M) advises student-athletes in the JMU Plecker Athletics Center. (Right): Professor Emeritus of English Bill McMurray taught Carter to push herself to excel.

