WITH THE EXCEPTION perhaps of the University’s first president, Eugene Farley, no one has impacted this institution more than Dean Emeritus George Ralston. The World War II major with two Purple Hearts joined Bucknell University Junior College as a counselor to veterans. He founded the athletics program in 1946 and eventually retired as dean emeritus of student affairs. Legendary for his ability to remember names, he personally interacted with virtually every student to cross campus during his tenure. His passing on March 2 generated hundreds of notes and letters to his wife, Helen, and the Office of Alumni Relations. We share a sampling here. See more remembrances online at The Colonel Connection, community.wilkes.edu.
A Healthful, Disciplined Life

It was my good fortune to have first met George Ralston at Forty Fort (Pa.) High School, when I was a student there and George joined the faculty after his WWII military service. He was a helpful teacher and coach who participated fully in school life. I remember his engaging baritone voice singing “Waterboy” at a school concert. He promoted living a healthful, disciplined life and warned everyone of the evils of tobacco. He taught us a little poem:

“Tobacco is a filthy weed,
From old Satan came the seed.
In 1954, Wilkes’ football team was over visiting the Wyoming Seminary post-graduate football team. I was on the high school team watching the teams play, and Wilkes was getting the worse of it.

Dean Ralston called his team together and stood in the middle of them (he came up to their shoulders) and said, “Men, we have to do better than this, or it is going to be a long year.” That was all he said, and they started playing again.

– Kelly J. Mather ’58, Sebastian, Fla.

Second Chances

The year was 1957 and I was called in to see Dean Ralston in my ninth grade, long before I was thinking about college. He emphasized this during my freshmen orientation in 1967. He learned this and passed it on.

My father, a barber, told George one day as he cut his hair that I had not done well at school, that I had been asked to leave for one year, and that my meeting with the dean of women proved fruitful in turning the tide. George suggested that I call him and make an appointment. He told me that he didn’t care if I took basket weaving, but I could return to school at night and that my focus should be on “acting every course.” He asked that I keep him up to date on my success, which he believed was a given.

Dean Ralston is the reason why I graduated from Wilkes, and I am certain that he believed in me, and his actions at that critical time in my life were the lifeline that I so desperately needed. Dean Ralston epitomizes what great educators are all about. He was a real human being, caring and fair words cannot express my words, and the way he said them. In everyone, he could see the GOODNESS and POTENTIAL.

– Rosemary Baiera Hieronymous ’68, Sebastian, Fla.

For that I’m very grateful to Dean Ralston.


Civil Rights Eye Opener

I went on the Hampton Institute/Wilkes student visit exchange with Dean Ralston, and it was a life-altering and affirming experience. It was a civil rights experience during the turbulent ’60s, with all of the racial tension.

– Claire Handler Silverstein ’63, Tampa, Fla.

A Gentle Push

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Between funeral services, Dean Ralston said, “Did you ever think, Son, what happened to you?” Before I could say anything, he went on: “How can you go down so far?”

I explained that my father had died, and that I took the finals – Wade Hayhurst ’51, Mollusk, Va.

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– Claire Handler Silverstein ’63, Tampa, Fla.

Make a Joyful Noise

I was amazed at the enthusiasm of a man who stood before the large class in the gym and stated, “If you can’t sing, make a joyful noise!” We did. I never forgot that day. He was always upbeat!


In September 2003, the Ancestral Colonels honored Dean Ralston with a – Rosemary Baiera Hieronymous ’68, Springfield, Pa.

A Lasting Impression

Dean Ralston is the reason why I came to Wilkes, stayed at Wilkes and returned to Wilkes. I first met Dean Ralston when I was in ninth grade, long before I was thinking about college. He made such a positive impression on me that I decided to attend Wilkes. At Wilkes, I saw Dean Ralston as a role model. On occasion, I would find the opportunity to talk to him. His words, and the way he said them, made me see him as a role model.


Vice President for Student Affairs

Wilkes University

The Dean is IRREPLACEABLE, not just because he was able to connect the history of Wilkes ACROSS the GENERATIONS, but because no one will ever have the lasting influence over Wilkes that he had. George’s focus on the individual and the emphasis he placed on the bonds formed through relationship are the very core of the student experience at Wilkes. His MARK on Wilkes is INDELIBLE. I can’t imagine anyone will ever better demonstrate through word and deed what it means to value each student, no matter her/his aptitude. In everyone, he could see the GOODNESS and POTENTIAL.


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Let’s Go Wilkes!
I vividly remember, during freshmen orientation in September 1967, Dean Ralston leading us in his special cheer. The freshmen in beanies and blue and gold ties sitting on the ground, Dean Ralston raised his arms in front of his face, fingers wiggling. “Let’s go Wilkes,” he whispered. As he drew his arms across his face again and again, the volume increased until we were shouting, “Let’s go Wilkes!”
– Walter Furtney ’71, Shoreview, Minn.

Oh, Brother
My brother, Grover, had come to visit me and was a little put off by the rules at Sterling Hall that would not allow guys to visit my room. My dorm mother would not believe he was my brother, so Grover got an idea to climb up the fire escape near my room. We visited a while, and when he went to climb down later, the security guards greeted him!

My roommate and I were horrified, and as they took my brother to a station wagon in front of the dorm, we went around the block trying to figure out what was going to happen next.

Finally, in walked the sense of reason, Dean Ralston, and he met with my roommate and me, and he was so kind and respectful of our feelings. He set everything straight, and my brother was released. We will never forget that night. He cared so much about all of us, and it was incredible how he handled things with grace, dignity and a great sense of humor, which calms everything down, so misunderstandings are easily worked through for everyone’s benefit.
– Holly Stults ’74, Santa Fe, N.M.

A Precious Gift Indeed
Many things could be said about George. I mention just two: His marvelous capacity to place names with faces, and his skill at incorporating his faith into his work.

I cannot remember a time when I did not know George, or when he did not know me. So I was not terribly surprised when, during freshmen orientation in the fall of 1971, he greeted me by name among a group of fellow freshmen from my dorm, Sterling Hall. My housemates, however, were very impressed: “Wow! Dean Ralston knows you?” The next time we were together with George at some function, he called every single one of us by name, and I understood for the first time how important that mnemonic skill was, and how gifted a practitioner George was. His capacious memory banks must have held thousands of faces, names and factoids about students. What I had attributed, during freshmen orientation, to George having known me from church was translated to a wider world view, embracing everyone even remotely connected with Wilkes.

George’s faith was wondrous to behold. Of course, his job at Wilkes was not as a chaplain or spiritual guide; but he stressed core values of fair play, good sportsmanship and academic integrity that grew directly out of his love for and service to Jesus Christ. George was an off-the-scale extrovert, which led to his behavior being well-known and minutely scrutinized, at some level, by all the undergraduates I knew. When a friend of my roommate’s had been “sent down” to see Dean Ralston after a plagiarism incident, my roommate expressed an incredulity that George had dressed her friend down with words that left no doubt about his commitment to leading students down a morality-guided path.

Dean Ralston was Wilkes’ biggest fan and most enthusiastic cheerleader.
George was a fine speaker, and the times he filled in for Jule Ayers in the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church were occasions for George to state explicitly what motivated his relationships to students, faculty and administration. George never talked of Jesus at school, but he certainly did, and with great integrity, in other places. His example has motivated me to live, and not just speak, what I believe. He was a role model that has helped me in a variety of both church and secular settings to minister with people who might have no overtly expressed religious beliefs. A precious gift indeed.


Long-Distance Degree

I had a rough start during my first year at Wilkes in 1978, but eventually I was able to stay the course only to fall short of funds to finish my last semester. I enlisted in the U.S. Air Force, where I was stationed in Okinawa, Japan. While there, I took several night courses over the course of a year and a half to complete my degree in business administration. I wrote Dean Ralston asking if I could possibly transfer my last semester of courses taken overseas toward my degree from Wilkes. I was very happy to receive a letter back from Dean Ralston, who remembered me and granted the transfer. Due to a problem with flights from Japan, I was not able to attend the graduation and be able to personally thank Dean Ralston for both his guidance and kindness.

Anton “Andy” Haryluck ’82,
Bury Saint Edmunds, Suffolk, England

Ubiquitous Biker

When I first attended Wilkes back in 1977, I would see Dean Ralston riding around campus on his antique bike, saying hello to everyone. Also, at a pep rally I remember him doing a Wilkes Colonel cheer. He is sadly missed!

Donna Karwaski ’82, Avoca, Pa.

Dear friends,

To all of you who have sent cards, notes and beautiful letters to me, I want to sincerely thank you. Please know that I would love to answer every one of them, but that is impossible. The donations to our scholarship fund have been outstanding. And how better can we show our love and respect for a man such as George, whose whole life was devoted to helping students succeed? Keep his ideals always in your hearts.

– Helen Ralston

The Dean will be honored homecoming weekend during pre-football game festivities at 12:15 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 6, at Ralston Field. Memorial contributions may be made to the George F. and Helen B. Ralston Scholarship Fund, Development Office, Wilkes University, 84 W. South St., Wilkes-Barre, Pa. 18766. Contact Evelyne Topfer, (800) WILKES-U Ext. 4309.