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A Deeper Appreciation

History Professor Paul Bushnell brought his unique perspective on history and social justice to generations of Wesleyan students.

By TIM OBERMILLER

At a Homecoming reception in the Center for Natural Sciences atrium, students and alumni circle Paul Bushnell, waiting for a chance to express gratitude, or just to catch a fresh glimpse of his familiar face. It is a countenance of curiosity and calm intelligence — though his benign expression has been known to roil at the presence of injustice. Matched with a glimmer in his eyes, his smile is inviting, conveying empathy and kindness in equal measures.

Stepping up to the podium, Wenona Whitfield delivered one of many tributes to Bushnell, who retired in 2013 after 47 years on IWU's history faculty. "I was angry when I came to Illinois Wesleyan in 1966," Whitfield said. "I was angry about civil rights, the war, women's rights. Paul knew my name, and he knew other black students' names. He'd walk up and ask how we were and what was going on. I can't remember anytime I walked into his office when I wasn't angry. But I never walked out angry."

Whitfield was a sociology major and founding president of the Black Student Union. After graduating in 1970, she earned a law degree from Southern Illinois University (SIU) School of Law and became a professor herself, retiring from SIU in 2007.

"He would ask questions in such a tone and with such calm, it was almost like talking to a priest, a confessor," Whitfield recalled. "He would make you think and focus. I'd be talking to friends and they'd say, 'Is he black?' and I'd say, 'No, but he's the next best thing.'"



"As an African American, I'm clearly a beneficiary of the Civil Rights Movement. I attended integrated schools and lived in integrated neighborhoods. Taking Professor Bushnell's class on Civil Rights put my family's experiences in a greater context." — Kimberly Nevels '95, shown above right with Syreeta Williams '01, left, and Samantha Robinson '01 (Photo by B. Corbin)



Bushnell was among the faculty retirees recognized at Honor's Day Convocation in April. At left, Professor Michael Young gave a moving tribute to his longtime friend and colleague. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

When Whitfield invited her professor to the podium, he shrugged, smiled and walked to the lectern. “Wenona, I remember you as a first-year student,” Bushnell said. “There were various discussions of social issues, and you finally got fed up and said, ‘This class is acting like little kids.’ It was one of the most stimulating experiences I ever had in a classroom, and it was because you were there.”

Many alumni were stirred by new perspectives Bushnell brought into his classroom, inviting students to join him in partaking in a richer, more complex examination of American history. It was in such a classroom that Mary Harris Melchor '70 first felt the tug that led to her lifelong pursuit of learning. Earning advanced degrees in education, business and law, she taught in Chicago Public Schools, became senior attorney for the Chicago Housing Authority and is now inspector general for the Cook County Clerk of the Circuit Court in Chicago.

“He was always energizing,” Melchor says. “Even though the classroom was lecture-style, it was like you were on the Quad sitting at his feet. That was the spirit. He seems to have the same effect on students today.”

Katrina (Roloff) LeBlanc '03 says Bushnell's teaching style has helped her engage her own students at Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook, Ill.

“I was completely enthralled with his stories,” she says, especially Bushnell's memories as an early participant in the Civil Rights Movement. “He lived it. He was a bit of a legend on campus. He gave me a deeper appreciation for history and how to get involved. I still tell his stories to my students. The lesson for them is if there's something you really want to be a part of, don't let it pass you by.”

At the reception, LeBlanc fought back tears as she told him, “You were an inspiration. I use your stories in my classroom.” She paused, and he leaned in to give her a warm hug until she found the words, shared by dozens of former students in letters and on Facebook when they learned of Bushnell's retirement.

“Thank you for your experience because it means a lot. *A lot.* ”

A special combination

Bushnell arrived at Illinois Wesleyan in 1966, bringing his “special combination of immense learning and nonviolent activism to our campus,” says fellow history professor Michael B. Young. “One reason he was hired was because the administration understood that students wanted faculty who were relevant to the issues of the day.”

Professor Bunyan Andrew, then chair of the history department, was looking for someone “who could reach the younger students, someone who understood what was going on in society,” says Bushnell. “College campuses were changing. We were no longer to be the ‘in loco parentis’ — a stand-in for parents. Students were taking more of an active role in their world and on college campuses.”

According to Young, “Paul contributed most significantly to racial justice” on campus, serving as an advisor to the Black Student Union, on the Minority Advisory Committee and on the Black Cultural Events Committee.

“Basically for many years Paul was the University’s go-to person on race relations,” says Young. Yet Bushnell’s “inner moral voice summoned him to speak out on *all* the burning issues of the day,” Young continues, “from the Vietnam War to the Gulf War — from freedom of the press to the general calls for peace and justice.”

In 1968, Bushnell introduced Illinois Wesleyan’s first course in African American history. Such courses were then a rarity, even at historic black colleges, which at the time “were trying to mirror white college curricula,” Bushnell says. The popular course quickly became a history-department staple, despite some “odd questions” about it early on, says Bushnell. For example, he recalls a reporter from Peoria asking him, “Are there enough books to even teach this class?”

“I very calmly replied, ‘Well, there are several hundred to start.’”

That one pioneering course, says Young, “eventually evolved into four courses, on slavery, black activism and the Civil Rights Movement.” Bushnell served as the history department’s “19th-century Americanist,” teaching a wide array of courses on the social, cultural and religious history of the United States. Together with Robert Bray, R. Forrest Colwell Professor of American Literature, Bushnell co-edited *Diary of a Common Soldier in the American Revolution, 1775-1783*. First published in 1978, it is still in print.



Bushnell consults with Monica Taylor '88 and Desi Smith '89. Taylor, who went on to head the University's Office of Multicultural Affairs, passed away in 2009.

But it is his Civil Rights Movement (CRM) course that former students mention most often.

Kimberly (Page) Nevels '95 wrote: "As an African American, I'm clearly a beneficiary of the Civil Rights Movement. I attended integrated schools and lived in integrated neighborhoods. Taking Professor Bushnell's class on Civil Rights put my family's experiences in a greater context." After taking the class, Nevels changed her major from English to history. "I also decided I wanted to be a civil rights attorney," which she now is, working in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity.

"His CRM class was my favorite of all the classes I took at IWU," Rose Ryan '01 wrote on the University's Facebook page, "and I wasn't even a history major! Professor Bushnell's personal experiences and connection with the subject matter made it come to life for me." Now a teacher at Schaumburg High School, Ryan says, "I still use excerpts from the books from his class with my own students every year."

Turbulent times

Many of Bushnell's formative experiences took place on the campus of the liberal arts College of Wooster in Ohio, where his father was a professor and where he later earned his undergraduate degree. During his sophomore year, Bushnell began a year living with his parents in Afghanistan after his father was recruited by the U.S. State Department to head an American-style secondary school in Kabul. During his early 20s, he continued his travels, trekking across the Middle East and Europe, sometimes hitching a ride on a mail bus.

While in graduate school at Yale University, Bushnell got to know several fifth-graders and their families through the YMCA in New Haven's ghetto area. "I had seen poverty when I traveled, but this was urban poverty in an industrialized country. It was disturbing to me — to see what children were facing and the lack of resources their parents had."

Bushnell and his wife Dorothy, who met in college, moved to Nashville in the late 1950s while he pursued a doctorate and was a teaching assistant at Vanderbilt University. Among his students was the Rev. James Lawson. Hailed by Martin Luther King Jr. as "the leading theorist and strategist of nonviolence in the world," Lawson trained many future leaders in nonviolence workshops, including Diane Nash and John Lewis. "It's odd to think I was grading James Lawson's papers," Bushnell says.

In 1960, Bushnell learned that black citizens in Nashville were beginning nonviolent protests by sitting at "white-only" lunch counters and other segregated areas. The quiet nature of the anti-segregation protests, inspired by Gandhi's example of nonviolent resistance, left many white owners and patrons simply stunned — at first.

"My first thought was, 'Finally. Finally this is happening,'" says Bushnell, who contacted Lawson with the intent to find out how he could actively support the sit-in movement. As one of only a handful of white members, Bushnell participated in several of the early lunch-counter sit-ins. He recalls looking straight ahead into mirrors on the lunch-counter walls to see reflections of the hostile white crowds behind them. Some castigated with their eyes, others in more direct ways.

“Occasionally they would come by and drop cigarette ashes on you, or threaten to burn you with a cigarette. There were little old ladies who would come and whisper the worst things to you,” he says. “There were other little old ladies who whispered, ‘I respect what you are doing. *Keep. It. Up.*’”



In a photo published in Life magazine, Bushnell can be seen on the top step of a church entrance behind police arresting his former student James Lawson. Bushnell later led Lawson's wife to his car and drove her home — an act of kindness that made an impression on the black community.

Demonstrators knew the possibility of violence grew greater with each sit-in. On Feb. 27, during sit-ins at three Nashville lunch counters, some of the protestors were dragged from their seats and beaten by white youths. Police ordered the protestors to leave. They refused and were arrested for disorderly conduct and loaded onto police paddy wagons as white onlookers cheered.

A few days later, Vanderbilt's trustees expelled Lawson for refusing to end his involvement in the sit-ins. Bushnell joined many of the school's faculty in protesting. With other white students, he wrote to Vanderbilt administrators asking why they weren't also expelled. "We let them know we did everything Lawson was doing, yet we were still there. Of course, I don't know what I would have done if they had expelled me. I had a wife and almost two children," says Bushnell, whose wife was pregnant at the time.

Nashville police then decided to arrest Lawson on charges of inciting civil unrest, a plan that Bushnell learned of through Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist David Halberstam, who later wrote a book about the Nashville nonviolent movement. Bushnell gathered witnesses and raced to the First Baptist Church, where Lawson was to be arrested. "Two motorcycle cops arrived wearing their leather leg pieces and chewing cigars," and led Lawson away in handcuffs, he recalls.

As the paddy wagon pulled away, Bushnell gently led Lawson's wife to his car and drove her home as TV cameras recorded the scene. He was later told the image had an impact on the local black community — "that there was support from a white person," Bushnell says.

For a white neighbor, Bushnell's publicized involvement had a different effect. "My son, Tim, who was 3 going on 4 at the time, knew a neighbor who always greeted him. After I was on TV, he didn't acknowledge Tim anymore," says Bushnell, sadly shaking his head. "How do you make a 3-year-old understand that?"

The challenge of democracy

Though much has changed since the 1960s, Bushnell feels frustration at how much remains the same.

Teaching a “Back to College” class at Homecoming, Bushnell tells an attentive audience, “America has always prided itself on not having a class system — and yet having a class system. Partly that’s because as a society, we’ve always been focused on upward mobility. We’re so focused on it that we overlook the fact that downward mobility is just as common, and more threatening.

“Our recent recession was a cause not just of minor disappointment, but a cause of fear — people losing the foothold they had on the ladder of ascent,” he continues.

Bushnell is especially discouraged by certain representatives in Congress. “They seem to have no qualms about subjecting the poor to even deeper poverty, while mouthing the myths about the poor. That they’re looking for a hammock, an easy way through life. What’s so easy on these marginal incomes, that barely keep food on the table? In fact, frequently it’s not there.”

Despite the passion of his words, Bushnell does not come across as angry. Rather — speaking in a soft, thoughtful voice — he comes across more like the consummate teacher that he is, one who knows how to hold listeners’ attention and move them beyond commonly held assumptions into deeper frames of reference. And, indeed, he has his “Back to College” audience at the edge of their seats.

“Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness — these things are getting harder to pursue, for all the citizens. These values are also at the foundation of our democracy, in which we’re now seeing one of the most serious challenges to its values that we’ve experienced in our lives.”

Bushnell’s words corroborate an observation by his longtime friend and colleague, Michael Young. “There are times in life when we can risk everything to do the right thing or we can just look the other way,” says Young. “Paul, stung by an inner moral voice, chose to do the right thing.”

Bushnell explains his motivation in another way: “I like to consider alternative, even contrarian, views to explain how ideas translate into action. We’re all too comfortable in the ways we think about ourselves.”

Editor’s Note: Writers Rachel Hatch, Kate Arthur and Sarah Julian all contributed reporting for this story.



Bushnell relaxes at home with his wife, Dorothy, who co-owns The Garlic Press in Normal. They have four children. (Photo by Marie-Susanne Langille)