In Memoriam: Dexter Whitehead

Dexter Whitehead, former director of the Center for Advanced Studies and dean of the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, died on May 27, 2008, at his home surrounded by loving care. He was 85.

Dexter grew up in Richmond and Old Church, Va., and attended the McGuire’s University School. He was enrolled in the University of Virginia and was awarded a B.S. in chemistry (1944), M.S. in physics (1946), and Ph.D. in physics (1949) and was a member of ATO, the Raven Society, Sigma Xi and several physics and University organizations.

He was a Predoctoral Fellow at the Carnegie Institution’s Center for Terrestrial Sciences, died on May 27, 2008, at his home and dean of the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences; both positions he held until 1989. He retired as Alumni Professor of Physics Emeritus in 1992. In 1975 he was the recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Award of the University of Virginia.

Dexter was also an artist and many of his paintings reflect his love for both the University and Maine. Some of his U.Va. paintings are on exhibit in the Garden Room on the West Lawn and at the Best Western Cavalier Inn. More recently his paintings were selected by the Arts in Embasy Program of the U.S. State Department and have been on location in Bamako, Mali; Ankara, Turkey; Nairobi, Kenya.

Dexter was survived by his wife, Lois Gibson Whitehead; his sister, Constance Kiermaier of New York, N.Y.; his sons Oliver Day Whitehead of Portland, Maine, and Thomas Whitehead; his sister, Constance Kiermaier of Norwalk, CT, and his two sons Oliver Day Whitehead of Portland, Maine, and Thomas Kenyon Whitehead of Charlottesville, and four grandchildren.

In keeping with Dexter’s commitment to academic excellence for the University, those who wish may contribute to the Dexter Whitehead Graduate Fellowship Fund of the University of Virginia Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

Magnetism in Washington, a physicist at the Bartol Research Foundation in Swarthmore and on the faculty at North Carolina State University from 1953-56. In 1956 he joined the physics faculty at the University of Virginia. He became a professor of physics in 1962 and chairman of the department in 1968. In 1965 he was appointed director of the Center for Advanced Studies and in 1969 became dean of the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences; both positions he held until 1989. He retired as Alumni Professor of Physics Emeritus in 1992. In 1975 he was the recipient of the Thomas Jefferson Award of the University of Virginia.

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Adam J. Jortner, a Ph.D. candidate in American history, is among 29 recipients of the Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowships given by the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

Newcombe Fellows, doctoral candidates in the final year of writing dissertations that address religious and ethical values, receive a 12-month award of $23,000. Jortner is the 35th U.Va. graduate student to receive one of the Newcombe Fellowships since their establishment in 1981.

"This is very exciting," Jortner said. "It is a great honor and it puts my studies in a much broader range of discussion about religion."

Jortner, 32, of Blacksburg, Va., is writing his dissertation, "Reign of Witches: A Political History of the Supernatural in America, 1780–1838." Some people during this period based their religion on fantastic events — signs, miracles, visions — which eventually pitted political legitimacy against divine sanction.

Jortner’s work is examining how small religious groups, such as the Shakers and the Mormons, and the reaction to them, has shaped church-state relations in America. "In America, we have a tendency to assume that the changes that occur are ‘what the people want’, that change happens when people are ‘ready’ for it,” he said. "But I don’t think that’s the case. U.S. society has been changed radically by small, intense groups that forced the changes upon us — and not always groups who wielded political power."

"Adam is a wonderful student, one of the best, and he has an original and brilliant approach to the history of Christianity in America,” said Peter Onuf, Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor of History and Jortner’s adviser.

Onuf said Jortner is very serious about his study of religion, which he approaches as a scholar, not a believer in a particular faith, and can see it through the eyes of other people. "He has a superb prose style and a charismatic personality," Onuf said.

Funded by the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation of Princeton, N.J., the Newcombe Dissertation Fellowship is the nation’s largest award for Ph.D. students addressing ethical and religious questions in the humanities and social sciences. Since its inception in 1981, the Newcombe Fellowship has supported more than 1,000 doctoral candidates, many of whom are now faculty at colleges and universities throughout the U.S. and abroad. This year’s 29 winners were selected from 452 applicants.

Jortner was drawn to history because he says it’s a “catalogue of ways to be human,” and allows him to track concepts people think are “essential,” even in religion, which some think of as unchanging.

"A lot of what we think can never change actually can change — which is both inspiring and terrifying,” he said. "Look at all the different ways, teachings, valences, philosophies, across time and around the globe, and it makes it clear that U.S. religion is always changing, and we’re not stuck in some pattern that was set in 1776."

Jortner is finishing a year as the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Fellow in American Religious History at the McNeil Center for Early American Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. Next year, he will be at the International Center for Jefferson Studies in Charlottesville, overseeing U.Va.’s Early American Seminar with faculty members Andrew J. O’Shaughnessy, George W. Van Cleve and graduate student Taylor Stormer. He will seek a publisher for his dissertation and is planning a career in academia.”

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Bearing Witness: Iraq Veteran Films “Our Story”

Elliott D. Woods (English Language and Literature ’08) appreciates his opportunities.

He survived a year of military service in Iraq, transferred to the University of Virginia, started two documentary film projects and has recently graduated Phi Beta Kappa with an English degree.

"I try to never lose sight of my good fortune," he said.

The Gaithersburg, Md., native transferred as a second-year student to U.Va., following a military leave that included serving in Iraq with the Virginia National Guard.

"When I came home I decided it was time to get serious about school," said Woods, 27. "I wanted to go to the best school possible and was thrilled to have the opportunity to transfer to U.Va. I felt like I’d been given a new lease on life.”

Woods is not leaving the military far behind, though. He is preparing A Few Unfrozen Things, a documentary film about returning veterans. He felt compelled by his own good fortune to tell “our story” — that of 21st-century war veterans.

"Homecoming for me has been relatively painless in comparison to some of the guys I’ve interviewed and many of the people I’ve read about," he said. "I do not suffer from chronic post-traumatic stress disorder and I do not have any lasting physical injuries. But I’m still stuck in between worlds. I’m still trying to reconcile the experience of mobilizing and becoming a full-time soldier at war with the experience of being a regular guy amongst other regular people."

Woods joined the National Guard in July 2001 in Richmond, Va., where he was living at the time, to get assistance paying for college. His life changed when, in March 2004, he was sent to Iraq as part of the 276th Engineering Battalion. His experience there included mine-sweeping, convoy escort and security-fence construction.

"Woods’ Iraq experience gave him great insight into the lives of the returning veterans, which illuminates his film. “It has been both harder and easier because I was immersed in the story I’m trying to tell," he said. “It’s harder because their pain is my own, too. But it’s easier because they grant me access to their emotions and problems to a level inaccessible by some Joe off the street.”

"He has an uncanny combination of rigor and compassion, of analytical acuity and poetic empathy," said English professor Jennifer A. Wicke, Woods’ academic adviser. "This carries over to his sense of his responsibility to bear witness, to uncover the truth and to lead people toward healing—including the healing that can only be provided by a terrible knowledge."

In Iraq, Woods learned firsthand about duty and honor among ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances.

“I learned a great deal about this country (America) and the people who populate it from the guys I served with,” he said. “More than anything else, I became determined. I came home with the knowledge that I have a tremendous wealth of opportunity, and I can’t afford to take it for granted.”

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"I’m trying to get back to Iraq as a reporter and continue to do there, and here, what I can’t do in the military anymore: help troops and tell true stories,” he said, noting that he plans to study Arabic in Egypt before being a journalist.

“He’s among those few students one encounters who will visibly change the world we share,” Wicke said. "“

"South Lawn Project

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Dear Friends

Just as the school year started this fall, I met — in quick succession — the College’s new group of first-year students and many members of the Emeritus Society. I told the students that they had joined an academic community that puts great emphasis on undergraduate education, and that they should expect to leave the College distinguished. The great measure of their excellence will not be who they are as they arrive here, as impressive as that is, but rather, what they become.

And then a week or so later, when I met many of you at the Emeritus Society weekend, I got to see firsthand people who exemplify what those students will become. I know that our alumni routinely accomplish great things in their professions and their communities. Many of you have gone farther still and served the College on our boards. That guidance and support is a clear demonstration of your affection for the University and your commitment to the success of your school.

Such generosity of spirit, and gifts of time and resources are a great help to me and to all of us who now shepherd the College and its students. For that we are most appreciative. »

Sincerely,

Meredith Jung-En Woo
Buckner W. Clay Dean of Arts & Sciences

Jortner Receives Newcombe Fellowship


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Dexter Whitehead

In keeping with Dexter’s commitment to academic excellence for the University, those who wish may contribute to the Dexter Whitehead Graduate Fellowship Fund of the University of Virginia Graduate School of Arts & Sciences.

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From University of Virginia President John T. Casteen III:

“Dexter Whitehead’s vision, drive, and diligence were often cited as a key factor in the University’s rise in the academic achievement, prestige, and research funding during the second half of the 20th century. He understood that improving the quality and stature of the University’s graduate programs was essential to building a great university. He spent his time observing the University. “He was a remarkably reflective man, one who thought deeply and constantly about all sorts of things, and who pursued goals that evolved from that thinking. While his paintings capture thought-provoking views of the Academic Village, they also represent his way of thinking and his influence on the University.”

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Dear Emeritus Trustees

I enjoyed seeing so many of you at the recent Emeritus Weekend. The weekend was a great chance to catch up not only with each other but with events at the College, and I hope in the future even more of you will be able to attend. For those who couldn’t make it, I’d like to offer a quick recap to give you a flavor of what you missed.

It was wonderful to hear Dean Meredith Wou’s remarks on her priorities for the College. Although new to Virginia, Meredith has a strong sense of the history and tradition of the University and a genuine excitement about finishing the Campaign for the College. Meredith is really rolling up her sleeves and diving in and her enthusiasm is infectious. Those of you who have yet to meet Meredith are in for a real treat.

Associate Dean for Graduate Programs Aaron Mills and some of his students gave us an eye-opening presentation on the needs of graduate students at the College. As Meredith noted in her remarks, in order for the College to increase its research visibility on the national level, we must continue to allocate resources to our graduate programs. Staying competitive is the key to attracting the best young scholars, such as Adam Shapovalow, who was featured in this newsletter.

At lunch Chris Brightman and Andry Shapovalow treated us to an update on UVIMCO’s investment performance and strategies, and then we were off for a hard-hat tour of the South Lawn Project. It was great to visit the site and see the Nau and Gibson buildings, with the names engraved on the façades. Since our visit, progress has been steady, and the construction of the terrace over JPA has begun. Some wonderful aerial photographs were recently taken and we’ve included a shot in the newsletter showing the South Lawn in relation to Cabell Hall and the Rotunda.

Over dinner Associate Professor of History Brian Balogh gave an enlightening talk on media in American politics in the global era. Brian showed us how candidates have used modern media to their advantage, from FDR and JFK to the Reagan era and up to the present atmosphere of e-mail, blogs and social networking.

On a more solemn note, the meeting was dedicated to the memory of W. Dexter Whitehead Jr., former dean of the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences, who died on May 27, 2008 at the age of 85. As those of you who knew him can attest, Dexter was an inestimable asset to the College and the University. A remembrance of Dexter can be found on the back of this newsletter.”

Best regards,
Juliana Schulte O’Reilly
Treasurer, Chair of the Emeritus Society