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A Majority of One

Courtney L. Tollison
Furman University

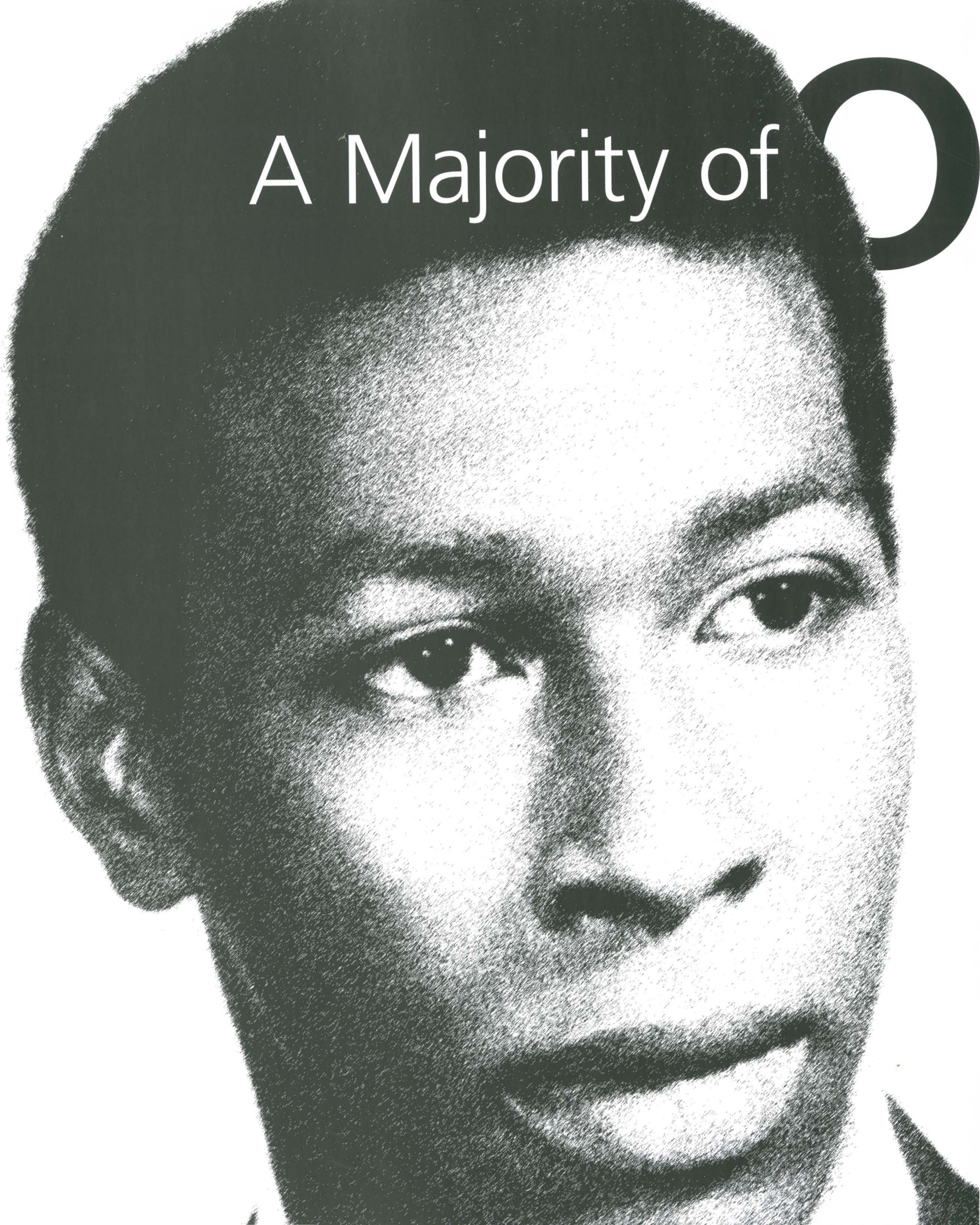
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A Majority of



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Joseph Allen Vaughn's matriculation into Furman in February 1965 represented both a culmination and a beginning for the university.

But how Vaughn became Furman's first African-American student was no accident. His enrollment was the result of a search conducted, at the behest of the university, by the now deceased Sapp Funderburk '39, a Greenville businessman and loyal Furman supporter.

Funderburk's assignment was to find the best graduating senior, but both he and Francis W. Bonner, Furman's vice president and dean and a leading advocate for desegregation, knew the student also needed to be able to handle the attention and scrutiny that would come with assuming such a pioneering role.

Funderburk recommended Vaughn — a Greenville resident, president of the senior class at Sterling High School, member of the school's honor society, and a Baptist.

Forty years after his graduation, Joe Vaughn's trailblazing influence is still felt on the Furman campus — and beyond.

Bright, witty, gregarious and confident, Vaughn was described by Xanthene Norris, one of his teachers, as "a jewel." Norris had seen Vaughn's potential early on and for years supervised his selection of classes in hopes that he would someday have just such an opportunity.

At a 1985 banquet commemorating 20 years of desegregation at Furman, Vaughn said, "I was good for Furman University, and vice versa. . . . I understood some of the risks, knew that there would be some isolation, maybe. But, luckily, there was not even any mental violence. . . . The press kept hounding me, to see how things were going, but I told them, 'I need to study. I came to Furman to be a student.'"

This February the Furman community came together once again to recognize Vaughn's legacy, in a program marking the 40th anniversary of his graduation. During the evening, those who knew him had the chance to reflect on the times and the man — and to put his contributions in historical perspective.

Joe Vaughn's presence in a Furman classroom was the result of years of strategy undertaken by the university's administrators, trustees and alumni.

Furman was established by the South Carolina Baptist Convention (SCBC) in 1826 as an "academy-seminary" to train young white men for the ministry. As Furman's parent institution, the SCBC was responsible for appointing individuals to Furman's board of trustees, a practice that continued until Furman and the convention parted ways in 1992. For decades before the separation, however, control over the university's governance had been a central theme whenever Furman and the convention disagreed about a course of action, and the admittance of African-American students was a prime example.

At Furman in the late 1950s and early '60s, student and faculty opinions regarding racial issues were more progressive than mainstream sentiment in South Carolina, and certainly more progressive than that of most members of the SCBC. Many Furman students were members of the Baptist Student Union, and at the BSU statewide meeting in 1961, the delegates voted to suggest that their schools' trustees give "careful study to this responsibility to open the door of knowledge and service to all students, regardless of race or creed." They passed a resolution stating that BSU students across the state supported the acceptance of all qualified applicants regardless of race.

BY COURTNEY L. TOLLISON

The same year, a poll of Furman faculty concluded that 90 percent supported an admissions policy that did not discriminate on the basis of race. Bonner presented these results to the Furman trustees, but they took no action.

Furman administrators recognized the importance of desegregation, both from an ethical and practical standpoint. Failure to desegregate was a major reason the university had repeatedly been denied a chapter of Phi Beta Kappa, the nation's leading academic honor society, and school officials also worried that continued segregation would affect their ability to recruit a top-flight faculty.

Throughout higher education, desegregation at Southern colleges and universities was becoming synonymous with an institution's commitment to progress. Bonner later said that he and President John L. Plyler had wanted Furman to be the first college in South Carolina to admit African-American students, but the trustees had been reluctant because of concerns about how the convention would react.

In January 1963 Clemson University admitted its first African-American student, Harvey Gantt, under a court order, and in September the University of South Carolina admitted a handful of African-Americans, also under court order. That October the Furman trustees adopted a resolution to eliminate race as a barrier to admission. Among private colleges in the state, the trustees' decision was second only to Our Lady of Mercy Junior College in Charleston, and it received much media attention.

The SCBC reacted with shock to what it perceived as Furman's abrupt display of independence. At the convention held a few weeks after the trustees passed the resolution, the messengers voted to ask Furman to delay implementation for one year so that the convention could study the issue. Furman agreed.

In the meantime Bonner had asked Funderburk to find a student with a strong academic record, a history of leadership and a personality that could handle the pressures of desegregating an institution. Once he met Vaughn, Bonner single-handedly admitted him to Furman.

Vaughn graduated from Sterling in the spring of 1964. Furman arranged for him to spend the fall semester at Johnson C. Smith University, a historically black institution in Charlotte, N.C., with the expectation that the SCBC would approve the trustees' action on the admission policy and that Vaughn would enroll at Furman in February. Xanthene Norris recalls that, although Vaughn was disappointed that he would have to wait, he "understood the challenge."

The SCBC executive committee charged with evaluating the revised admission policy had recommended that the convention support the decision. However, at the annual convention in November 1964, the messengers rejected the recommendation by a margin of almost two to one.



Suddenly, the trustees were caught between the needs of the institution they were obligated to lead and the expectations of the group that elected them. And another factor weighed on their minds.

Gordon Blackwell, a 1932 Furman graduate and president of Florida State University, had recently accepted the call to be Plyler's successor. Upon hearing of the convention's vote, Blackwell sent a letter informing the board he had taken the job with the understanding that desegregation was "a condition" of his coming to Furman. Continued segregation, he wrote, would do "irreparable harm" to Furman.

At a called meeting of the board on December 8, 1964, Bonner, who had served as the university's chief administrative officer since Plyler's retirement at the end of August, stepped forward. Sensing that the trustees might be wavering under pressure from the convention, he delivered a powerful speech in which he recounted Furman's efforts to desegregate and the support of the faculty and students for doing so. Further inaction, he said, would endanger many of the university's hopes for the future. He urged the board to uphold the revised admission policy and closed with a passionate plea: "Don't let us down!" His efforts proved successful, as the trustees decided to stand by their earlier vote.

Vaughn and Blackwell both arrived at Furman on February 2, 1965, along with three African-American non-resident graduate students in education. Of his first few days on campus, Vaughn once said, "Everyone [was] very nice to me, but they didn't seem to be going out of their way just to be that way. I was glad they seemed to accept me as another student and not as some sort of symbol."

And from that time on, Joe Vaughn would leave an indelible mark on the institution.

Vaughn's career at Furman defied the typical experience of the handful of African-American students who desegregated Southern colleges and universities. Most of those young people preferred to diminish the attention already paid to them due to their race.

But Vaughn neither avoided the spotlight nor downplayed his commitment to progressive social issues. As he once said, "I felt like a majority of one."

His sense of humor helped endear him to his fellow students — and defuse potential problems. He flashed that wit at the 1985 banquet when he said, "I even burned a cross on the balcony of McGlothlin dormitory. I had heard you were doing it before I got here, and I just wanted to show I was one of the boys."

A natural leader, he majored in English and minored in French. He was a cheerleader (some have even credited him with introducing the "FU All the Time" cheer) and a member of the Baptist Student Union and the Collegiate Educational Service Corps, for which he helped develop a support program for high school dropouts. This work would foreshadow what would become his lifelong commitment to South Carolina's youth.

In addition, he was a member of the Furman chapter of the Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), a group whose political activism sparked intense campus debate and controversy during the late 1960s.

In 1985, Vaughn headlined a program recognizing 20 years of desegregation at Furman. Opposite: In 1990 Vaughn and trustee Alester G. Furman III helped Collegiate Educational Service Corps work on a Habitat for Humanity home.

As a member of SSOC, Vaughn helped plan and recruit student participation in a demonstration in downtown Greenville in February 1968 after three students were killed and 28 injured in an event, now referred to as the Orangeburg Massacre, at historically black South Carolina State College. Two months later he recruited students to join him in a march down Greenville's Main Street in the days after Martin Luther King's assassination.

He also chaired the "Talk a Topic" committee that planned forums on issues such as race relations and the military draft. One forum on race brought undercover FBI agents to campus because the committee had invited the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan to participate.

Lillian Brock Flemming '71, one of the first African-American women to graduate from Furman, knew Vaughn from Sterling High. He helped recruit her to Furman, and they were longtime friends.

At the commemorative program in February, Flemming said she believed that Vaughn's success was due in part because he told his white friends, "I want the same things that you want. I have the same dreams and aspirations that you have. And I have the same intellect that you have."

Like Vaughn's former teacher, Xanthene Norris, Flemming also pointed to his keen mind: "People talked about Joe's intellect, but they didn't understand the magnitude. He could embarrass you in three different languages and you didn't [even] know it."

When a sense of isolation crept in among the small group of African-Americans at Furman in the late '60s, Flemming said that Vaughn encouraged them to stay positive and remain focused on academics. She recalled him saying, "You're not here because you're black. You're here because you're a student."

Vaughn was a senior when Furman's current First Lady, Susan Thomson Shi '71, enrolled. She said that her main memory of arriving on campus was "the feeling [of] absolute normality. This was not a deal at all. Joe was here, and Joe was in charge of everything. It didn't occur to me that there was any other way.

"Joe had done such a phenomenal job of transforming this place that student- and faculty-wise, my sense was that everything was the way it was supposed to be. Joe created that feeling for the rest of us."

Harry Shucker '66, recently retired vice president for student services, was a junior when Vaughn enrolled. He remembered the "remarkable evenness of disposition Joe carried his entire life. He understood the significance of his role as the first African-American student to be admitted, but he never took himself too seriously."

After graduating from Furman (and subsequently earning two master's degrees), Vaughn taught in Greenville County from 1969 to 1982 and also served as a visiting lecturer at the University of South Carolina.

Charles Gardner, a childhood friend, remembered Vaughn's "sense of caring for others. He was a teacher and a reacher. It is one thing to teach.



A. DAVID CROSBY

It is a little bit deeper to reach. Joe was a reacher."

One of Vaughn's former students, Neil Harris, said that Vaughn introduced him to "the idea that being black was something special and something to be proud of." Harris also echoed Garner's remarks: "Joe didn't segregate. He reached out to every student

at Mauldin High School. He saw potential where we didn't see it. When everybody else saw chaos, Joe could slow it down and say, 'You're gonna be something, just a little bit different. Come with me and let's see what we can make of you.' Joe took responsibility for each and every one of us."

In 1982 Vaughn was elected president of the South Carolina Education Association. He would go on to serve on the Governor's Task Force on Critical and Human Needs and on a Blue Ribbon Task Force on the South Carolina Education Improvement Act. He worked as a drug education consultant, coordinated the Greenville County School District's substance abuse program, and developed an in-school suspension center to assist with social and academic problems.

Years after they had both graduated, Susan Shi remembered watching Vaughn galvanize an entire football stadium while leading a cheer during a home game against South Carolina State. "Joe could walk in a room and take over or change the sense of how things were moving," she said. "It was one of the rare times during our football season where we had a truly desegregated-integrated experience on our campus. You could sense as everyone was moving into the stadium the determination [that] this was going to be fun and this crowd was going to love each other.

"I looked up in the stands to see Joe Vaughn in the middle of the S.C. State crowd with all his Furman stuff on, and he single-handedly had us together on the same page, pulling for something a whole lot bigger than a football game. That is my last memory of that wonderful man."

Flemming emphasized, "Joe wanted everyone to understand that there were four things in this world that he loved — one, his Mama Clara; two, Sterling High School; three, Greenville's Southernside community [where he grew up]; and the fourth one became Furman University. He was a great ambassador for Furman."

Joe Vaughn died on May 31, 1991, at the age of 45. Six years earlier, in February of 1985, he had encouraged students and others in the university community to "Make sure you are a part of Furman's greatness."

He certainly was. |F|

The author, a 1999 Furman graduate, holds a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina. She is assistant professor of history at Furman and museum historian for the Upcountry History Museum.

The Joe Vaughn Scholarship at Furman is awarded each year to a student who demonstrates financial need, exemplifies high moral character and shows academic promise. To support the scholarship, contact the development office at (864) 294-2475 or e-mail betsy.moseley@furman.edu.