

1-1-2009

## Shirley keeps on pushing the educational envelope

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### Recommended Citation

Hunt, Stephanie (2009) "Shirley keeps on pushing the educational envelope," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 51 : Iss. 3 , Article 27.  
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol51/iss3/27>

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## SHIRLEY KEEPS ON PUSHING THE EDUCATIONAL ENVELOPE

Poetry and teaching have much in common.

A good poet and a great teacher both beckon us to thresholds where experience and expression come together and fling open doors to some wider mystery, some larger “Aha.”

Bob Shirley knows this. As a poet and a teacher, a dreamer and a doer, he is convinced that education is dynamic and vital, and that visionary schools shape visionary citizens.

Which is why, at the age of 73, Shirley is still mentoring faculty, monitoring carpool traffic and roaming hallways decorated with the shaky cursive of third-graders and their crayon-illustrated stories.

“I realized I can’t stand retirement,” says Shirley, a 1958 Furman graduate who “retired” as head of Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia, S.C., in 2000. During his 22-year tenure at the two-time National Blue Ribbon Award-winning school, he instituted a critical thinking program and an outdoor leadership development program and oversaw a significant jump in enrollment and endowment, bolstered by two substantial capital campaigns.

He had earned a rest, but after three weeks of retirement he was bored and antsy. So he jumped at an invitation to be interim head at Gaston Day School in North Carolina. After two weeks there, Shirley called his wife and announced, “Thrace, I’m back home.”

He served subsequent interim stints at a school in Boston and at the Columbia Museum of Art before returning to work full time in 2005 at Charleston Collegiate School, located 20 minutes outside South Carolina’s Holy City amid the magnificently graceful oaks of rural Johns Island.

Charleston Collegiate, a private school with a diverse, wide-ranging constituency, has been a stimulating challenge and satisfying closing act for Shirley. He arrived intending to spend a year helping to stabilize the struggling school, which had recently changed its name and lost its headmaster.

“I looked at the data and realized this was not a one-year job. It’s difficult to recast this school as a progressive school in a conservative community,” notes Shirley, a blue-dog Democrat and stalwart advocate for diversity. (While teaching at Summit

School in Winston-Salem, N.C., in 1966, he joined with his headmaster to pay the tuition for the school’s first African-American student.)

“We’re trying to look to the future, not to the past,” he says. “This school has the potential for being a real jewel, a much-needed breath of fresh air in Charleston.”

Lorin Anderson, who served as Shirley’s Ph.D. advisor at the University of South Carolina, points out that “Bob has stepped in to rescue any number of struggling schools. His track record is absolutely incredible. He’s energized by difficult situations.”

With his sneaky/wise smile and Southern gentleman’s gift of gab, Shirley seems more the adoring school grandfather than hard-driving headmaster. Charleston Collegiate’s cozy size (275 students, pre-K to grade 12, with 24 percent minority enrollment, the highest among private schools in Charleston) is well suited to his hands-on approach.

“I’m constantly working with the faculty, retraining the teachers,” he says. “I long for teachers who make knowledge in the classroom, not who bring knowledge to the classroom.” He’s most proud of “putting together an eager, young, dynamic, diverse faculty,” 75 percent of whom have master’s degrees.

A born teacher — during his early years as a Marine and a banker, he taught soldiers communication skills and set up a teller-training school — Shirley pays little heed to traditional educational strategies like strict curriculum standards and standardized tests. Instead he embraces such concepts as creative, collaborative learning and personalized instruction. He’s a passionate reformer who believes that education is fundamentally about active engagement.

And actively engaged he is, both in the private and public school realms. “We’ll be better when public schools are better, and public schools will be better when we’re better,” he believes.

As founder and executive director of the National Center for Independent School Renewal, Shirley is



a catalyst for educational innovation across the country and a leader in the national debate on school change. In 2000 he was honored with South Carolina’s Order of the Silver Crescent for his contributions to education and his work on a public school reform initiative called “South Carolina Re: Learning.” He also serves as president of the New Morning Foundation, which seeks to reduce teen pregnancy in South Carolina.

“I believe in being outside the box,” says Shirley, a published poet who looks forward to writing more once his work at Charleston Collegiate is complete. The irony of his out-of-the-box thinking, however, is that his “new school” vision is based on classic old school concepts, such as requiring “exhibition of mastery,” similar to the old “declamation” when seniors delivered a final paper before faculty and peers.

It’s true that sometimes taking steps forward requires taking a few steps back, and Shirley is eager to step forward — back to a time when learning is done by the heart as well as the mind. “Bob is like E.F. Hutton,” says Anderson. “He thinks one child at a time, one parent at a time, one school at a time, and he makes decisions based on the immediacy of those concerns. He’s motivated by real people in his care on a daily basis. And that’s a prescription for excellence for anyone in education.”

—STEPHANIE HUNT

*The author is a free-lance writer in Charleston.*