

“Driving Mr. Yarbrough”
by Patrick Martin '94

When Jeb Byers asked me to drive to Miami to pick up former headmaster Bob Yarbrough and drive him back to Virginia for reunion 2003, I was somewhat hesitant. I was not sure why he had asked me. I knew little more than rumors of this man and that his name was on the side of the gym. I soon learned that he is more than a man; he is a master, a scholar, a leader, father to many boys, and a gifted storyteller.

I flew into the Miami airport at 1:00p.m. Bob picked me up at the airport in the Mercury Sable in which we would spend the better part of the first two weeks of summer. Bob is a tall man with a portly stature (a side effect, he tells me, of quitting smoking). He wears glasses and has little hair on his head (a side effect, he informs me, of building CCS's gymnasium). We saddled up our full size sedan and headed for East Ridge community where Bob lives. He showed me around his modest apartment pointing out his most prized possessions: a framed painting of St. Peter's chapel, a black and white photo of the ground breaking of Yarbrough gym, a distinguished service award signed by Cliff Asbury and Bob Phipps, and an honorary CCS class ring from the class of '66. His chamber was littered with rich nostalgia, which could only be the mark of a man who spent a life in the business of serving others: a life dedicated to education. Bob hummed a bar from “What is it all about Alfie” and handed me a small ceramic statue of a Chinese man with a long beard. He assured me that it would bring my students luck on all their essays. Bob sat me down to look through some pictures from his most recent honor, the naming of the humanities building at the Palmer Trinity School. This building, like the gymnasium we know so well, is a fitting tribute to a man who was so good at turning dreams into reality for the young boys and girls with whom he worked.

The pictures were not good enough though; he had to show me the real thing. Just a few blocks through palm-lined streets and stucco mansions, we arrived at the campus of Palmer Trinity, a well-respected school in the Miami area. The campus was quiet, the students were gone and the faculty was at their year-end party. Bob showed me the plaque, which designated him as the namesake: “The Yarbrough Building for the Humanities.” Just around the corner from his building the doors of the gymnasium flung open and a stream of teachers and administrators came flowing out onto the sidewalk. They saw Bob and attacked him with a flurry of hugs and questions. Their affinity for this man was evident. One by one, they hugged and questioned and then we proceeded on.

Bob had made dinner arrangements for us. It was 4:30 p.m. and we headed for the Piccadilly Cafeteria. There was no wait and we got the best booth in the house. As we sat, Bob began to recount some of the wisdom he had gleaned from his lifetime of teaching. He is a consummate English scholar. Bob tells me that he knew Eudora Welty and that his father had hunted with William Faulkner on their farm in the Mississippi delta (the same farm that produced the magnolia trees on the main lawn). Bob has a serious affinity for southern gothic. His favorite is “Light in August.” Next thing I know, he is quoting Hamlet and Macbeth. His high-pitched voice reverberates as we gobble down our mashed potatoes and fried shrimp and the other Piccadilly patrons cannot help but eavesdrop at the sound of these foreign cantos. We finished our dinner and Bob dropped me by my hotel. It was 6:00 pm. He instructed me to get right to sleep we would leave the next morning at 5:00.

Outside of Miami there are nothing but oranges for hundreds of miles. As we rolled along the lifeless highway that morning Bob's anecdotes begin to flow as thick and deep as the orange groves that surrounded us. He painted a picture of Christchurch that is very different from what we see today. The entire campus was essentially housed in Bishop Brown. This central building was a dorm, an infirmary, faculty apartments, and classrooms. The students' rooms had no doors and they slept three to a cubicle. He told me about his struggles trying to raise money to build Wilmer Hall, Miller Building, and Yarbrough Gym, but he says the hardest thing he ever had to do was to expel a student. Some, he admits, he had no choice; some were mistakes, but all he regrets.

We stopped to sleep at Point South, South Carolina. We dined on fried shrimp and French fries, which Bob commented, “could not hold a candle to Joe Cameron's cooking . . . he never fixed anything I didn't like.” Joe was Bob's favorite Christchurch fixture. He spoke often of this chef's ceaseless devotion to the boys.

He told me Joe came to CCS in the late forties after leaving a steward's post on the C&O railroad. Bob watched him fix the boys soft crabs, crab cakes, deviled crabs, homemade bread, steak, and even fish roe while enjoying the delightful banter of the ladies who assisted him in the kitchen. Joe, however, was more to Bob than a chef, "he was a civic leader" and the heart and soul of Christchurch School.

As we rolled through the flat roads of low country South Carolina on day two of our trek, Bob spun more tales for me. "The students used to drive the vans," he recalled. One time a student fell and was hurt seriously at a school dance. Bob was so worried that he rode with the student in the ambulance. "We went flying through West Point so fast that it passed in the blink of an eye." He also told me about the boys who got into trouble and those he knew he would miss. He knew all of the student's middle names when he was headmaster and could still get them sometimes at reunions.

As we passed South of the Border he recounted the high jinks of the Kennedy boys who bugged Grover Jones so bad one time that he hung them up by their pants on the coat hooks in the bottom of Scott Taylor Hall. He recounted the old Ghost Night tradition: an early prank carried out in memory of Andrew Kratz who died in the river during the early days of the school. The students hauled seaweed from the river and plastered the dorms with it. He told me of the time Chris Shradly punned "this was slated to happen" as the slates of the Bishop Brown roof blew off under the winds of hurricane Hazel. He told me of his admiration for Jered Bunting and Dick Working. He spoke of Al Miller, Bob Bray, Fred Wilmer, and Emmett Hoy without whom he claims he, and the school, could not have made it. And then, as if time had frozen for two days, appeared on the horizon the beloved sign of a man's past and boy's future. We cruised along the pine-lined drive, down which many boys have reluctantly ridden and many men have joyously returned. We pulled up in front of the red brick edifices that were once this man's home and our trip was through.

Bob toured the campus with me as the fleeting light of the sun sparkled across the Rappahannock and we shared stories of the two very different schools we knew. On Friday the alums rolled in. Bob introduced me to everyone under the tent. *I* was the one that drove Bob Yarbrough from Florida. All of the stories that Bob had told me, all of the faces he had described suddenly came alive. I was overwhelmed with an amazing sense of brotherhood. I began to realize the magnanimity of this place, this experience. I have always considered myself lucky for having been a student here and now a teacher, but suddenly it seemed to be much more. I realized that it is not the place or the facilities or the money or the grades, but it is the people. The students, teachers, staff, and administrators past and present. Everything else changes, everything else is temporary. But, the people are forever in our minds and in our hearts. For me it was CCS history teacher Mr. Powell, my advisor and friend for my four years here, and for a dozen generations of graduates it was Bob Yarbrough.

Bob is a hero to these boys and they gave him a hero's welcome. They cheered him and talked with him and shared old stories. Bob meant much to them. Much more than the name on the side of the gym. Much more than any story could relate. Much more than any car ride could reveal. His influence on generations of students at Christchurch and abroad is something that only those young men know in their hearts and a special quality to which all educators aspire: the solitary voice saying "yes it matters and is a life well spent."