



ENGAGE YOUR WORLD

Ben Fountain, Humanist

Dr. H. G. Jones presented this address on Friday, May 4, at Wake Technical Community College in Raleigh during the North Carolina Humanities Council's ceremony for the John Tyler Caldwell Award for the Humanities which honored Dr. Benjamin Eagles Fountain, Jr.

Who is this man, Benjamin Eagles Fountain, Jr., who gave his family and friends a scare a few months ago and who today, through the marvels of medical science, walks among us with five heart-bypasses?

The vital statistics: He was born in 1929 on the Edgecombe side of the railroad track that divides Rocky Mount, the nephew of the then-sitting Lieutenant Governor [R. T. Fountain] and the son of a future member of the State House of Representatives [Benjamin Eagle Fountain, Sr.]. How fortunate we are that the natural pull toward politics was counterbalanced by his mother Emmie's role as a public school teacher, and that even as a child Ben's inclination was toward a career in education. He prepared for that career with three degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and at age 21 he returned to neighboring Nash County to teach, and, within three years, become the principal of an elementary school in Rocky Mount. Following a tenure as Executive Secretary of the North Carolina State School Boards Association, he returned to UNC-Chapel Hill and taught courses in education. Dr. Fountain's later performance as Superintendent of Schools in Elizabeth City from 1961 to '65 brought him to the attention of Dr. Dallas Herring and the State Board of Education, and he was selected President of Lenoir Community College in Kinston. Under his leadership the faculty of the then technical institute grew from 10 to 65, and the student body from 250 to 1,400 regular and 5,000 other students taking short courses on and off campus. A modern campus was built for what was recognized as a jewel in the rapidly growing community college system.

Those achievements were worthy of emulation on other campuses, so in 1971 Dr. Fountain was elected to the presidency of the statewide Community College System, a high-sounding position with, as he only half-jokingly told a reporter, so little authority that he couldn't approve the purchase of a typewriter. Power lay less in the State President than in a combination of members of the State Board of Education, presidents and trustees of the individual schools, and local politicians and legislators. Nevertheless, he survived the internecine wars and, through ingeniousness, persistence, tact, and effective lobbying in that minefield called the Legislative Building, he led the system, in eight years, to encompass 57 institutions, each with its permanent campus and collegiate accreditation, and a combined enrollment of 121,000 full-time and a half million part-time students. Dr. David Bruton, one of the finest students who ever sat in my classes, told me recently, "When I became Chairman of the State Board of Education, Ben Fountain was the very successful President of the Community College System. . . . Much of the current success of the North Carolina Community

College System stems from concepts and procedures that Ben Fountain created. People who knew the real inside story of that chaotic time admire Ben greatly!"

Tired of the bureaucracy and eager to return to what he described as "my first love . . . students, books, and the campus," Ben stepped down from the State Presidency in 1978 to become President of one of the system's constituent institutions, Isothermal Community College in Rutherfordton. Predictably, he led that institution to phenomenal growth, in the first four years doubling its enrollment and adding three new buildings.

Ben retired from the Isothermal presidency in 1985 and returned to the Raleigh area, where he taught in the Department of Adult and Community College Education at North Carolina State University.

At the Community College System's 25th anniversary in 1988, Ben Fountain accepted the I. E. Ready Award and the State Board of Education's resolution saluting him as "a man of leadership, totally committed to the system's open-door policy."

In recent years Ben has busied himself in history, historic preservation, and educational and civic organizations such as the Sons of the Revolution. His future will be very busy as he assumes the chairmanship of the Peace College Foundation. He currently has at the printer a history of his Edgecombe County family, and he is at work on the history of a Civil War military company from Edgecombe.

Ben did not do all of this alone. At his side has been his wife, the former Norma Fagan of Martin County, a teacher and pianist. Most of their four children and eight grandchildren are with us today, including, I might note, his son and namesake, who is taking time out from attending banquets and accepting literary prizes for his recent book, *Brief Encounters with Che Guevara*.

But I know our John Tyler Caldwell Award recipient in another capacity. If it is a truism that "All progress begins when a new crowd takes over," a corollary may be "Founders sometime fail to acknowledge subsequent progress." I hope that Ben and I fit neither stereotype.

I was Director of the State Department of Archives and History when Ben came to Raleigh, so I knew him casually as a fellow agency head during the administrations of Governors Bob Scott and Jim Holshouser. But I had to go to Washington to *really* get to know him. Individually, five Tar Heels were invited by officers of the infant National Endowment of the Humanities to come to Washington and discuss a subject for which we were given little advance information. On the appointed day, May 27, 1971, the five—John Caldwell, George Bair, Dwight Rhyne, Ben Fountain, and I—met with John Barcroft, Signa Dodge, and Leonard Oliver. We visitors listened for hours as our hosts talked in terms that at least I did not fully understand. After a fine lunch at public expense at the 16 Restaurant, we went back and listened more. By mid-afternoon, I began to understand the opportunity being offered us. The NEH wanted to give North Carolina some money, but federal procedures wouldn't permit them to give it to us unless we asked for it. About the only parameter seemed to be that the funds be spent in the promotion of the humanities among the general public. Now, John Caldwell, Chancellor of NCSU, and Ben Fountain as President of the Community Colleges, had some pretty specific ideas, for Dr. Caldwell was a deep-thinking philosopher and Dr. Fountain was a deeply committed educator with a let's-get-it-done demeanor. George Bair, director of UNC Public Television, immediately saw possibilities for his programming; Dwight Rhyne's UNC Extension Division could certainly use some help; and I could envision the role of historians in the humanities. But no organization, no money.

My diary (now in its 70th year) records on May 27, “We will constitute a North Carolina Committee for the Humanities.” Note the exact wording, “We [Caldwell, Bair, Rhyne, Fountain, and Jones] will constitute [*ourselves*]” a committee. And we did. On June 8, I recorded, “Met in Chancellor Caldwell’s office to work out application to the National Endowment for the Humanities for program design and area conferences”; and the next day George Bair notified the NEH of the committee’s formal organization. By “formal,” we meant that “We are a committee; please send money.” We did, and they did. I can’t remember exactly how the first check was made out, but I suppose it was to the Department of Community Colleges, for on August 18 Ben delegated as staff person for the committee Dr. Maurice Stirewalt. Not so incidentally, Ben, who had established the first local history program at Lenoir Community College, also instituted a similar program at the state level under Maurice Stirewalt’s direction—another of his legacies as State President. I tracked down Maurice recently at Northeast State College in Tennessee, and he remembered Ben’s insistence on the kinship between the humanities and local history. Of his role in our work in 1971, Maurice wrote, “I can certainly attest that my work in the NCHC effort was intense, broadening, beneficial, and rewarding to me as a professional. . . .”

During the next few weeks the committee worked with Dr. Stirewalt on the adoption of a theme, and on November 30 we submitted an application for a major grant with which to conduct public programs on the subject of “Traditions in Transition: The Impact of Urbanization on North Carolina Communities.”

Picture this: Five men were intrusted with taxpayers’ money at a time when the dictionary did not contain the word “grantsmanship,” and nonprofit organizations were virtually all run without paid staffs. At that time, North Carolina ranked 50th among the states in getting back dollars sent to Washington, but Tar Heels took that as a badge of honor because we were proud of our state’s tradition of taking care of its own needs. That made more sense than sending a dollar to Washington, financing a bloated bureaucracy, and getting back only 50 cents worth of services.

By the end of the year, “we” (that is, the self-appointed five, who had absolutely no legal standing) anointed as members of an expanded committee Jean Eason, Austin Hyde, James Jackson, Cecil Patterson, Sam Ragan, and Dorothy Williams. Thus North Carolina formally established the seventh state-based humanities organization in the nation. Sam Ragan, incidentally, had just been appointed Secretary of the newly established Department of Art, Culture and History, and he kindly offered to take the committee (and its money) under his wing. Ben Fountain, having quickly learned enough about the bureaucracy, saved the day by persuading us to remain an independent group. For that foresight alone, Ben Fountain deserves the Caldwell Award.

Now, with money at its disposal and an elongated name, this unchartered, unincorporated North Carolina Committee for Continuing Education in the Humanities (the acronym NCCCEH sounded like a cough) opened for business, and during 1972 we distributed \$125,000—a huge amount of money in those days—to 30 organizations for the conduct of public discussions on the general subject of how North Carolina could avoid, in Terry Sanford’s colorful description, “Creeping New Jersey”—conjuring up the specter of gridlock on the New Jersey Turnpike, unbridled growth, economic and social ills, crime, and political corruption then so well publicized in some cities to the north.

It is difficult for today’s generation to understand the integrity of public servants before claims on other people’s money became an accepted practice, but our committee took our trust seriously, and we sought to resist every artifice presented by political advocacy groups, often bearing euphemistic titles, that sought support for their

cause. We knew that the quickest way to incense taxpayers is to use their money against them.

When the committee (later properly chartered and renamed the North Carolina Humanities Council) was founded is less important than *why* it was founded. Note the date, 1971: The Cold War was still frozen solid, the Soviet Union was rattling its nuclear weapons, and a DEW Line was drawn across the Arctic to detect oncoming warheads; we were bogged down in a bloody war in Vietnam, and public protests, such as at Kent State University the year before, had turned violent; North Carolina's speaker ban law had only recently been ruled unconstitutional; and McCarthyism was still alive. These issues, compounded by the murder of Martin Luther King three years earlier and growing civil rights movement, had divided the formerly solid Democratic South. It was an era of polarization, and intemperate voices from all sides of the political spectrum excited passions and sometimes incited violence, particularly in public discourse, where dissident factions sought to drown out those with different views.

It was a time for the yelling to stop, so our committee conceived what many at the time probably thought was a naive notion: Bring people together in public debate and discussion and allow them to express themselves forcefully but respectfully. To aid in the experiment, we looked to the campuses, such as UNC-Chapel Hill, the citadel of free expression, where Bill Friday had kept alive Frank Graham's flame for tolerance for all points of view, and we sent into local communities academic humanists who understood that each of us sees issues through the prism of his or her unique experiences and values, none of which are alike, and that, consequently, equally intelligent and sincere people do not need to agree on every subject so long as they grant the same right to others. Our objective was to assure the general public that the essence of democracy is the willingness of every citizen to hear all sides of an issue, then make a decision based upon his or her own reasoning. *Participatory* was the operative word in our plans. Always the danger existed that these discussions might be hijacked by special-interest groups with narrow agendas, but we sought to avoid that peril by insisting upon balanced presentations. We were particularly resistant to being used directly or indirectly by politicized individuals and groups that equate political, social, economic, or religious views with character and human worth.

That was a third of a century ago. Looking back, I do think what John, George, Dwight, Ben, and I started in 1971 has been beneficial. The archives of NCHC can document the results. A single shining example: Tom Lassiter's Johnston County Forum, in which Professor Robert Rankin from Duke served as Humanist in Residence and brought together people who expressed themselves forcefully but politely in that largely rural county. True, we certainly did not avoid the perils against which Governor Sanford warned us. (For example, the gridlock on Interstate 40 this afternoon makes the New Jersey Turnpike of 1971 look like a raceway.) Nor were we successful against other evils that we thought we might resist.

But of all of our failures, one haunts me personally, because it reflects darkly on my own profession as a historian and educator. In the 1970s, intolerance toward differing viewpoints, particularly on the volatile issue of race, was most notable among the least-educated, general population, and, in an effort to open minds, we sent *academic* humanists into communities throughout the state with the message of tolerance and respect for minority views. We chose men and women who were imbued with a sense of tolerance characteristic of the Frank Graham era.

Yet, within twenty years some of those very academicians who suffered—or could have suffered—under the censorship of McCarthyism and speaker bans ignored

that lesson and sought to limit diversity of opinion by imposing speech codes on faculty and students and applying political tests on search committees on the grounds that only *their* truths deserved to be heard in the classroom, on campus, and in the public media. Forgetting Benjamin Franklin's admonition that we ought to doubt a little our own infallibility, some scholars pronounced themselves omniscient, then set about to discredit any point of view except their own. By doing so, they demonstrated that intolerance is not limited to the uneducated—that indeed the level of respect for differing opinions may be lower in academic circles than in the country store in my native county of Caswell. When the Orwellian definition of *diversity* becomes *conformity*, and when *conformity* becomes *orthodoxy*, we have learned nothing from McCarthyism or speaker bans. Perhaps it is time for the Humanities Council to engage in a reverse missionary effort by bringing to the campuses humanists from the state at large—citizens who have learned to live together in fellowship with neighbors whose views they may not share but which they respect, and with whom they live in peace and harmony by simply agreeing to disagree.

Each of us can think of other problems that are still with us. Certainly we failed to resist ills about which Terry Sanford warned us, and many of our homegrown shortcomings have been exacerbated during the past thirty-six years. Still, Ben and I want to hope that the humanities programs, which have reached vast numbers in our state, have improved public discourse by demonstrating that good people do not have to think alike—that indeed, in a democracy, diversity of opinion is a sign of strength, not weakness—and that we do not have to vote alike to be equally worthy and patriotic Americans.

Ben Fountain, who provided professional leadership and logistical support to our state-based humanities program in its infancy, can look back upon a distinguished career in which he played a major role in promoting the humanities and improving education in North Carolina. For that, not only the NCHC but all of the citizens of our state owe him our thanks and congratulations upon his acceptance of the John Tyler Caldwell Award, appropriately named for our late colleague who shared his wisdom and inspiration with all of us.

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