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The Southerner

A Great Teacher

By **Will Norton**

Although most of his friends think of Willie Morris as a successful writer and creative editor, to me he was a great teacher.

His journalism classes at The University of Mississippi were not devoted to details of how to write. Rather he read examples of good writing and explained to students why the writing was good. He read samples of writing by students in the class, and his students improved by applying the techniques to their own writing.

In his classroom on the Oxford, Miss., campus, Willie also demonstrated his great ability as an editor. He knew a good story, and he knew whom to assign to each story. So he brought out the best writing in each student. Many of his Ole Miss students have become outstanding writers and reporters. He knew how he wanted each piece written, and he worked with each writer to craft each article.

I was grateful for the attention Willie gave our students in advanced classes. I was the chair of the Department of Journalism at The University of Mississippi, and Willie's teaching brought a measure of excellence to our program that was uncommon on a typical university campus.

During the fall semester of 1980 I learned that faculty in the Ole Miss English Department and Larry and Dean Wells, owners of Yoknapatawpha Press, were trying to make arrangements for Willie to return to Mississippi. Willie had been invited to the campus as a visiting lecturer, teaching a writing course and a course on great 20th century novelists. However, the English Department was several thousand dollars short of the requisite salary.

Our department had enough dollars to complete the deal. So, after I learned about the possibility of bringing Willie to Ole Miss as a writer-in-residence, I called Gerald Walton, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and we worked out a deal. In exchange for a contribution from our department, four journalism students would be enrolled in each of Willie's classes during the spring of 1981.

During the spring semester, Willie told me that the journalism students were among the best in his classes. They had been writing for publications for several years, he said. So they understood what a writer goes through. They knew something about deciding what to write and what not to write. They had experienced the decision-making process.

At the end of that academic year, Willie and the English department could not reach an agreement, and he joined the faculty of the Department of Journalism.

To celebrate, Gale Denley, an associate professor of journalism and one of the

leading weekly editors in the state, hosted a faculty dinner at his house in Bruce, a 45-minute drive south of Oxford on Mississippi Highway 15.

I arranged to drive Willie to Gale's house. I picked him up, and we drove to campus, parking in front of Farley Hall, which had housed the Law School until Journalism moved into the building.

Farley Hall was on the corner of the Grove Loop and Sorority Row. We had stopped to pick up my wife, Susan, who was visiting in the crowd of students who were celebrating on bid night. Sorority Row had been blocked off, and hundreds of coeds and their friends were partying after getting into the sororities of their choice.

My wife is a Phi Mu alumna, and she was interested in who had received Phi Mu bids. I got out of the car and headed for the street in front of the Phi Mu House, across from Farley Hall.

"I'll be right back, Willie," I said. "I'll just let Susan know we're here."

"All right, Mr. Chairman," he said. Willie had been calling me Mr. Chairman ever since he was named a faculty member in our department.

As I looked back, I saw Willie getting out of the car and moving along the edge of the crowd. I tried to keep an eye on him as I looked for Susan.

"We're ready to go," I shouted above the din, after finding her. "Willie and I will be waiting in the car. We're in front of Farley."

I headed over to the east side of Sorority Row where I had last seen Willie. He was standing behind a bush, peering at the dozens and dozens of clusters of students yelling and dancing and jumping into each others' arms.

"I told her to meet us at the car," I told Willie, and we walked slowly away from the celebration.

Willie sat down in the front seat on the passenger side, rolled the window down and closed the door. He took out a cigarette, lit it, took a long draw and slowly exhaled out the window. He seemed deep in thought as he watched the frenzied street party.

"They don't know it," he said quietly, almost to himself, "but this is the best day of their lives."

Despite his idealistic writing, in his heart Willie did not seem to be sure that there are happy endings. Deep down, he seemed convinced that the harsh realities of adulthood can easily shatter the sweet dreams of youth. He was a gentle, sensitive man, and he had endured many tragedies. In some ways he seemed so vulnerable and lonely.

Perhaps it was his understanding of life that drove him to help young people. He was drawn toward bright young people and almost consumed by a desire to help them develop their writing while protecting their innocent goals and dreams. He wanted to try to reassure them that the adult world that he had found so severe was really something with which they could cope.

Similarly, Willie was drawn toward children. He loved to talk to them. He talked to them as equals. He encouraged them and entertained them. He told them stories,

and he always seemed to be teaching them something.

One evening he ate at Taylor's Grocery, a grocery store and restaurant a few miles south of Oxford, where catfish was served several nights a week. We were in a small group, and Willie spent the whole dinner talking to our son, William, who was 2 years old. At the end of the evening, Willie gave William a little note attached to a bag of candy, "To William, from William."

Our son William had been only 13 months old when we took him to a book signing the previous year for Willie's book, *The Courting of Marchus Dupree*. It was at the former location of Square Books on the east side of Oxford Square, upstairs, above Neilsen's, the oldest department store in the deep South.

I held William as we stood in line for more than 30 minutes, waiting for a chance to talk with Willie and get his signature. When we reached the table where he was signing his autograph, Willie looked up at Susan and me. Then he opened our copy of *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* and wrote a brief note, signed it and then closed the book.

We chatted a few more minutes and headed down the stairs for the sidewalk and a short ride home.

Once out of the store, Susan stopped, opened the book and read what Willie had written:

October 7, 1983

To William,

I hope you'll remember the day you were here in the bookstore with your mama and daddy.

I believe in you, William.

Love,
Willie Morris

I would have loved to have Willie as a teacher. He did not build a course infrastructure for a class with all sorts of hoops for his students to jump through. He designed a course to accomplish a broad objective. He wanted students to become good writers. To do this, he read selections in class, listened to students talk about themselves, became better acquainted with them and made assignments suited to their personalities. His assignments were designed to give students successes, and the assignments became progressively more sophisticated as a student mastered basic techniques.

I think Willie's teaching ability was evident during his years as editor at *Harper's*

magazine. When we talked about specific articles that had appeared in *Harper's* during his years there, he would tell me why he had chosen that particular person to write the piece. He told me the right writer was essential for a piece. He worked very hard at finding the right writer. A writer might be right for one story, but not for several others. Willie knew how he wanted each piece written, and he worked with each writer to tell the story the best way possible. Under his tutelage, many well-respected writers became exceptional, and he helped several become very wealthy.

During the early 1980s Marcus Dupree, a young African-American high-school student, was developing into one of the best football players in America. Because Dupree was in the first racially integrated class to go through 12 years of school together - and because he was the running back at Philadelphia, Miss., where the terrible murders of civil rights workers had occurred in the early 1960s - Willie decided to do a book on the recruiting of Dupree.

For several months Willie made trips to Philadelphia, interviewing the locals. He talked to dozens of Philadelphians before Dupree's senior football season. Then Willie covered the season and talked with Dupree dozens and dozens of times.

On Nov. 13 he asked me to go with him to watch Dupree in the Choctaw Bowl, Dupree's last high school football game. We saw him break Herschel Walker's high-school career touchdown record.

More importantly, Willie learned that Dupree had narrowed his college choices to 12 universities. Ole Miss, which had been trying to recruit him for three years, was not on the list. We talked about the race issue and Ole Miss as we rode home, and we discussed the challenges facing the New South. We agreed that the people of Mississippi had come a long way in a short time and that they deserved a lot more credit than they generally received.

Willie left the department during the mid-1980s, and I did not see him very often, but we kept in touch. We talked several times after I accepted the deanship at the University of Nebraska, and before I left Ole Miss. On one occasion he reminded me that he had been on the field in Memorial Stadium for the Oklahoma game at Nebraska. He was there to see Marcus Dupree, who as a freshman was the star running back for the Sooners.

"It gets cold up there," Willie said. "It gets cold," and then he laughed impishly. He knew how fond I was of the deep South and Ole Miss, and he wanted me to feel the foreboding of living on the cold Northern plains.

At the end of my second year in Lincoln I received a package from Willie. It was a bound volume of *My Two Oxfords* by Willie. Attached was this note:

May 1992

A famous rare book publisher in Iowa printed this limited edition of 210 copies, of

which he gave me 20. I wanted you to have one. Who knows, it may be worth a lot some day. It's chiefly aimed toward the collector's market.

How are things in Nebraska?

Best,
Willie

The gift reminded me that Willie did not forget his friends.

Our children have read *Good Old Boy* and several other pieces by Willie, so when our daughter, Elaine, heard of Willie's death last month, she asked, "Will they play taps?"

We talked about her question, and about Willie's significance as a writer and editor. Elaine would have learned more if Willie could have been part of the conversation. He knew how to explain things so well, especially to young people.



[Will Norton, Jr., is dean of the College of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Nebraska. One of his great professional rewards was teaching on the faculty of the Ole Miss Department of Journalism with Willie during the early 1980s].

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