

Taking math to a higher plane

When young Francis Jones arrived at Huntington College as a freshman with an aptitude for math, he was planning just a temporary stop. That's not how things worked out.

The country was in the shadow of the surprise Sputnik satellite launches, and Uncle Sam was trying to raise a corps of scientists and engineers to help the country catch the Russians in the space race.

Jones figured he would stay a couple of years at Huntington and then ship out to a more specialized school where he would train for a career in engineering.

Thirty years later, he's still at Huntington. To his surprise, he found that he really liked mathematics and physics and he had a strong sense that God's plan was for him to be a math teacher.

He did leave for a bit to get his doctorate, but returned in 1971 to become chair of the math department, a position he still holds. Along the way his name has become identified with innovation and ingenuity and his influence on a generation of students is said to be incalculable.

It's been 18 years since he took a class with Jones, but Larry Jackson of the Class of '82 recently invited him to his 40th birthday party. "Of all the people I've known, he's made a real difference in my life," says Jackson.

Rick Miller, a math grad in the Class of '89, likewise gives his old prof high marks: "Francis Jones was my inspiration. He was my mentor who always pushed me that little bit beyond where I was and made me realize that I did have

within myself the ability to actually accomplish what he asked me to do."

Jones wears such praise with an easy humility.

"I'm their teacher, coach, and cheerleader," he acknowledges. "I do try to communicate to the students that I care about how their lives are going, in addition to how they're school work is going."

His students say he brings to class an almost childlike exuberance for math that's hard to resist.

"He's a very excited teacher," says Christy (Jensen) Holliday, a '98 grad. "Even though he's worked the same proof 30 times, he's still excited to get to the end of that proof and see all the pieces fall together."

Jones' trademark style is to lecture using an overhead projector, hurriedly scrawling notes on the screen. Often times in his excitement he smudges and smears what he has already written.

"Trying to take notes was always a challenge," Holliday laughs.

Miller remembers showing up the first day for Jones' course on "Real Analysis" and realizing that he was the only student. "He actually lectured and asked questions as if it was a class of 15 students," Miller recalls.

Other professors might have canceled the class, or turned it into an informal chat session with looser, more relaxed expectations. Not Professor Jones.

This personal touch, this belief that

every student counts, is what a small Christian liberal-arts college should be all about, Jones says. He and the members of his department "go to extra effort to be nurturing and challenging to our students."

Dr. Patrick Eggleton, who joined the HC math faculty in 1999, says Jones sets the standard.

"The things he does in the classroom are just incredible," Eggleton says. "He has all these activities for students—art and videos and computer programs and books. He tries to make all sorts of connections to make math real. This doesn't normally happen with mathematicians."

But Jones is no ordinary mathematician. For him math is as much about faith as it is about working problems.

"We frequently had conversations that connected mathematics to our faith, to give me an understanding of more than just a theorem or a proof, a greater connection to life as a whole," Holliday recalls.

Thirty years later, Jones still gets excited about what he calls the "surprisingly elegance" of math. And he's still excited about pointing HC students to math's higher plane:

"Math is so much more than the numbers," he says. "Being Christian doesn't give me any special insight into how to do the next statistics problem or calculus problem. But it does give me a better appreciation of the nature of the universe and the nature of God." ■

