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CLASS ACT

Dean of Admissions Parker Beverage retires after helping to enroll more than 11,000 Colby students

By Earl Smith

On the golf course Parker Beverage frowns on mulligans and will chide his less scrupulous partners at the mere suggestion. “Let your conscience be your guide,” he is known to say, eyes twinkling as he records his every stroke. His stance on the subject is no surprise to those who know him. He doesn’t bend rules in the game of life, either.

Nowhere have his standards been more evident than in the competitive arena of college admissions, where for 26 years he steadfastly resisted gimmicks designed to boost applicant numbers and ratings. Instead, as dean of admissions and financial aid, he clung to traits that others say best define him—unwavering integrity, good humor, and lots of old-fashioned hard work.

Beverage retired June 30 as Colby’s longest-serving admissions dean, but the tenure record pales when compared to his professional achievements. His time at Colby overlapped the period of the College’s most rapid rise to prominence, and, as President William D. Adams told trustees this spring, “If the measure of a college is in some important sense the quality of its student body, then few people have done more to define Colby’s measure than Parker.”

His ethics likely come in part from his Maine upbringing and the rigor of military service. With roots on the Maine islands of North Haven, Cranberry, and Mt. Desert, his family moved to Augusta when his father became an executive with Central Maine Power Company. After Cony High School, the younger Beverage attended Dartmouth on a Navy ROTC scholarship, graduated in 1968, and began a four-year stint as a naval officer, including a tour in Vietnam. He returned to work as an admissions officer at Dartmouth and in 1974 married Mount Holyoke graduate Ann Gallie.

The couple soon moved to California, where both attended graduate school until their daughters, Clare and Emily, were born. Parker earned his master’s degree in education administration and policy analysis at Stanford in 1976 and stayed on as an admissions and financial aid officer until 1985, when he became Colby’s dean. Soon after, Ann Beverage began work as Waterville’s city planner.

On Mayflower Hill Beverage served as a sort of college planner, helping to assemble the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle that is each Colby class. Soon college guidebooks and rating systems had proliferated, and competition for the finest students was fierce. From the outset Beverage adopted a pattern of scouring every application himself, choosing carefully to build high-achieving classes that more accurately reflected the broader world. It was a hands-on approach to the admissions dean job that Steve Thomas, director of admissions, calls “unprecedented.”

Over the past quarter century Colby applications have increased by more than 60 percent. Along the way Beverage pored over more than 100,000 applications, and, while it is not surprising he is fondly remembered by many of the 11,500 students he enrolled, his friends are often astonished to discover he remembers most of the students as well.

Jamie Brewster ’00 is one of many whom Beverage admitted. Now associate director of admissions and financial aid, Brewster says Beverage’s recall of students “is but one of his many gifts that show he cares much more about people than numbers.”

Beverage’s admirers also extend deep into the broad network of secondary school counselors for whom he has long been, as one put it, “the face of Colby College.” Dan Walls, a counselor at Pace Academy in Atlanta, credits Beverage for remaining “old school” despite the pressures of an era of “relentless admissions marketing and hype.”

A diligent worker at his desk, Beverage also has been a charming ambassador for Colby in secondary schools. “He is a master speaker,” said Mike Sexton, vice president for enrollment management at Santa Clara University in California. Beverage, Sexton said, draws in students and parents with a memorable and serious presentation and then, with a grin, tells them something that will make them laugh.

By all accounts one of Beverage’s finest legacies is found in the faces of the Colby student body. During his tenure, the number of students of color has increased three-fold, and now the student body also includes students from more than 60 nations.

Beverage and his staff have traveled the world to spread the word. Gareth Rees, retired counselor at United World College of the Atlantic, said Beverage was one of the first college recruiters to make the trek to Wales. “The hardest part of being host to Parker was getting him away from the students in time to catch the train,” Rees said. Beverage’s travels for Colby took him to 36 countries.

As a key player on the senior administrative staffs of presidents Bill Cotter and Bro Adams, Beverage also made contributions to Colby’s programmatic growth. With former Dean of Faculty Robert McArthur he helped establish the dual-degree Colby-Dartmouth program at the Thayer School of Engineering, and Beverage took part in many decisions leading to major curricular changes.

Perhaps nowhere is Beverage more admired than among his immediate colleagues in Colby’s Lunder House. Never mind that he brought fresh flowers from his garden to the office on summer days, they say, his concern for the personal and professional well-being of colleagues created a powerful camaraderie that survived every bruising admissions season and served the College well.

Two of his close associates—Judy Levine Brody ’58 and Carleen Nelson—retired this spring as well. (With Beverage, they represent a remarkable combined 106 years of service.) Nelson, an administrative secretary who served six admissions deans over 51 years, says her latest boss consistently inspired “respect, loyalty, and affection” from his staff.

Brody, a 32-year veteran and senior associate dean, often found herself the first to report news of Beverage’s retirement to colleagues throughout the network. The reactions, she said, carried a strikingly similar refrain: “Oh, that Parker. How we love him.” ©

