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Earl: Dean, mentor, friend, confessor, sage, judge, advisor and "Professor of Nothing," Earl Smith leaves Colby a better place

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Earl

DEAN, MENTOR, FRIEND, CONFESSOR, SAGE, JUDGE, ADVISOR AND “PROFESSOR OF NOTHING,” EARL SMITH LEAVES COLBY A BETTER PLACE

And to think he didn't even plan to go to college.

This was 1957 and Earl Smith, who would eventually become the first and thus far only dean of the college at Colby, was three days from graduation from Waterville High School. No one in his family had a college degree and Smith entertained no notion of being the first. So when a vocational teacher at the high school told him of a job working nights in the mechanical department at the *Morning Sentinel*, Smith thought about it.

“He said, ‘It's nights,’” Smith said. “I'm not working nights. I had a high school diploma. He said, ‘It pays forty bucks a week.’ I said, ‘I'll take it.’”

And so began the career of the small-town boy

who would become an advisor to and confidante of three Colby presidents, who would help guide the College through four decades of change, who had a hand in everything from negotiations with Vietnam War-era protestors to the disbanding of fraternities to two presidential searches, who salvaged students others were ready to send packing, who was a mentor to so many international students that doors remain open to him from Africa to Asia and beyond.

“Earl was like a treasure,” said Peter Angwenyi '00, who now works in a bank in his native Nairobi. “For those who discovered him at Colby, I think they were very happy people.”

BY GERRY BOYLE '78

Future Colbians won't have the chance.

Smith retired at the end of June, trading his deanship for the part-time post of college historian. He is writing the second volume of the history of Colby, the sequel to Ernest Marriner's *History of Colby College*. This raises an interesting question: how will Earl Smith write about Colby without writing about himself?

Self-effacing, wary of the spotlight, a soft-spoken but witty observer who retained many of the qualities of the journalist he once hoped to become, Smith is as intertwined with what Colby was and what it has become as anyone in recent memory. Some say he embodies Colby's reputation as an institution that not only educates but guides and develops students. "What really sets Colby apart and makes me wax poetic when I'm talking about my college, particularly out here where people have never heard of it before," said Carol Lockwood '90, an attorney in Honolulu, "is just the difference people like Earl make."

He began wending his way to Colby's senior administration by a non-traditional route that began when a managing editor of the *Morning Sentinel* recognized Smith's potential and urged him to go to college. Smith sold his 1941 Buick (a gift from his grandfather) for \$50, which paid for a semester at the University of Maine at Orono. The UMO public relations department needed a photographer and Smith landed the post and became editor of the university newspaper. He married Barbara Hubbard, a sweetheart from Waterville, while still at UMO and they had a daughter, Kelly. Smith was a stringer for the *Bangor Daily News*, peddling photos to magazines.

"Pictures of people swallowing goldfish and seeing how many people you could put in a phone booth," he said. *Life* magazine bought a Smith photo of "co-eds crammed into a hollow tree."

After graduation with a journalism degree, Smith returned to Waterville and was promptly offered a job at the *Morning Sentinel*: telegraph editor for \$5,000 a year. Before he could accept, Dick Dyer, then Colby's public relations director, offered a job as news assistant-photographer. The pay



was the same. "It wasn't as easy as you would think," Smith said. "I wanted to be a journalist and this was a tub-thumping job, a flak, a P.R. job. But I took [Colby] because it was days and I had two children. It turned out this job was day and night anyway."

Smith covered sports, wrote game stories and press releases. He took photos, including senior pictures ("people swinging from birches"), and had lots of student friends. Some, like Colby football star Steve Freyer '67, now a Boston-based sports and entertainment agent, still remember the photos Smith staged: football shots in treeless spring, Freyer and other Red Sox fans ostensibly listening to the 1967 World Series during football practice. "He was always conjuring up ways to promote the school," Freyer said. "Just a wonderful guy."

Others agreed. Promoted from the news bureau to student activities director (1968) to associate dean of students (1970), Smith became an invaluable resource as the Vietnam War sparked protests on campus and students demanded changes and an increased role at the College.

"He seemed to have that same remarkable, uncanny sense of what was fit and right when it came to dealing with the students as he did in dealing with the faculty and staff," said former President Robert Strider. "And that takes talent. . . . He was a pillar for me, a right-hand person because I needed all the help I could get. These were tough times and the president was beleaguered. Earl had this remarkable way of talking to the students. He



was tough with them but they liked him and it was obvious."

It was equally obvious that Smith had found a place in Colby's inner circle. He never left.

President William Cotter found Smith to be equally indispensable as the trustees considered the fate of the fraternity system on campus. "He didn't make a lot of comments himself," Cotter said. "He was much more seeing to it that the process was going



From top left: Earl Smith the reporter with former Morning Sentinel sports editor Harland Durrell; Smith (center right), Colby photographer, preparing a portrait at Johnson Pond; Smith, the College spokesman; publicity photo of Smith early in his career at Colby.

smoothly and the input was being gathered.”

It was Smith who strictly enforced the guideline that the commission members keep their views of the fraternity situation to themselves until all of the fact-finding was done. Ultimately it was Smith who co-wrote the commission’s report with Judge Levin Hicks Campbell. It was Smith who coped with the post-fraternity fallout. It was Smith who, after the fraternities were disbanded (a move he endorsed), was able to maintain close relationships with fraternity members.

And was his guidance sound? “Absolutely,” Cotter said. “Very sensitive. He absolutely loves students.”

Nearly all of them.

That may be the essence of Earl Smith, a man who as dean of students saved countless Colby students from themselves. This entire story—this entire magazine—could be filled with anecdotes from alumni who say they will never be able to repay Smith for the mercy he showed as they knelt with their heads upon the dean’s chopping block.

There’s Joseph Mizhir ’85, an attorney with a private practice in Massachusetts, who was flunking out when Smith, rather than ejecting Mizhir as a goof-off, encouraged him to turn his grades—and his life—around. “There isn’t

a day that goes by that I don’t wake up and thank god that I had the opportunity to meet him,” Mizhir said at his law office. “If it wasn’t for Earl Smith, I’d probably be out digging ditches somewhere.”

Some administrators may have felt Mizhir didn’t deserve a second chance, but Smith stood by him. “The words [Smith] said that I’ll never forget are, ‘People can make mistakes and people can change,’” Mizhir said.

Can and do.

James Cousins ’75, a transfer student, initially felt lost at Colby but with Smith’s unflinching encouragement buckled down and excelled. Cousins is now a physician who runs vital refugee programs in Southeast Asia, and he and Smith remain close friends.

Boyd “Byrd” Allen III ’75 is now a hydrogeologist in Boston. In 1971 he was a first-year student hauled into the dean’s office because he and his friends were using record albums as Frisbees and sniping at a neighboring dorm with a slingshot, among other infractions. Social problems were compounded by Allen’s spotty academic performance. Allen says Smith could have sent him home but didn’t. “I think Earl has the ability to recognize the qualities that somehow are buried in people,” he said.

But to Smith, who must have X-ray vision

when it comes to seeing the good in young people, those qualities aren’t buried at all. “We don’t have any bad kids, you know,” he explained. “We just have kids who do bad things. And everybody’s screaming for their neck. But when it comes home, Monday morning, in the dean’s office, and you look eye to eye with this creature, you say, ‘You’re a damn fool for what you did. This is terrible. There are consequences for what you do.’ But please, you’ve got to save his butt because he just did a dumb thing. . . . There are so many people out there who have made such great lives for themselves. If you weren’t careful, you could have screwed that up. Be careful, because here’s a very precious thing and we can break it.”

That describes Smith’s attitude toward students and toward Colby itself—a precious, always growing thing that must be carefully tended lest you kill it. Protecting Colby from those who would, with the best intentions, steer it wrong is one of Smith’s more subtle but valuable contributions. “His genius, I think, is that he does understand the place so well,” said President William “Bro” Adams. “And that’s not to say Earl doesn’t have his criticisms of Colby. One of the things that I admire about him is that, while he has a lot of love and affec-

tion for the place and is thoroughly of it, he's also able to see it critically."

And when he sees the College about to veer off course, he will gently inform the person at the helm. "If he thought I was doing something really stupid he would, in a diplomatic way, show me what some of the pitfalls might be," Cotter said.

That someone who arrived on campus with no Colby pedigree should be so protective of the College's future perplexed some members of the Colby community early in Smith's career. In fact, there was some murmured concern that not only had this emerging force at the College not attended Colby, he had no advanced degree at all.

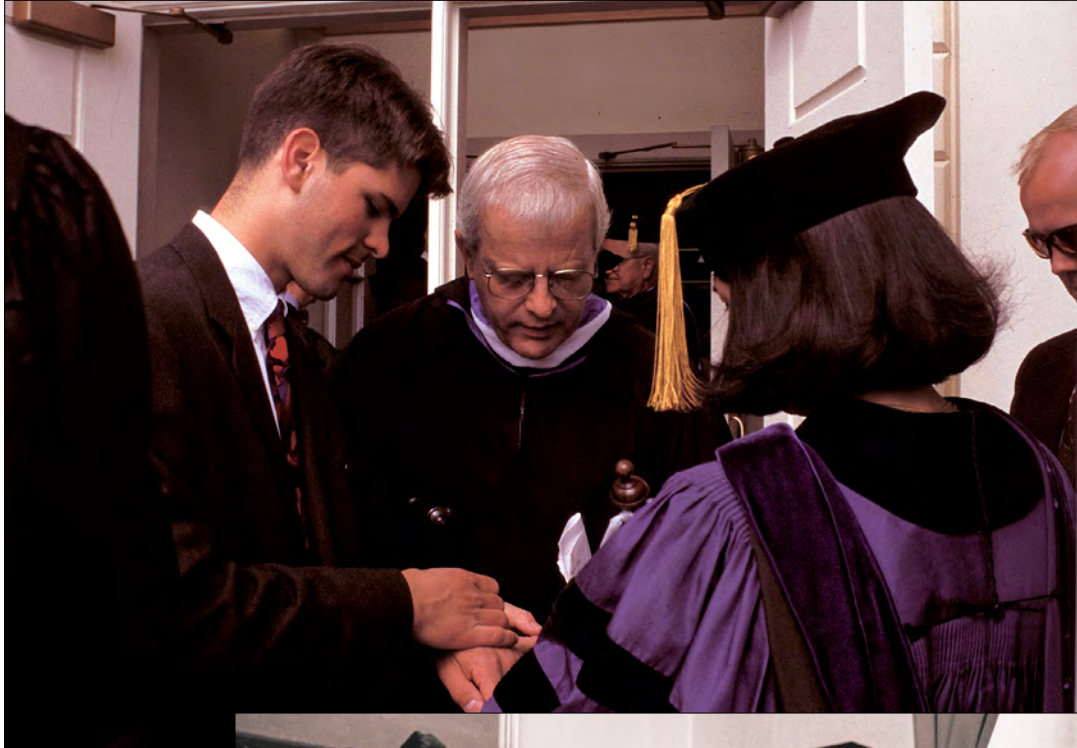
Strider was the first to attempt to remedy that, dispatching the young associate dean back to the University of Maine where a master's degree was offered in student personnel and administration. Smith gave up after spending a summer with graduate students who were flipping through textbooks to find answers to problems he faced in real life every day. "No clue," he said. "No clue whatsoever."

But lack of an advanced degree didn't interfere with Smith's climb up the academic ladder. Assigned the rank of assistant professor in 1970 by Strider, he became associate professor in 1981 and was appointed full professor by Cotter in 1995. "I'm full professor of nothing and chairman of the department of nothing," he said with his characteristic flicker of a smile.

But don't let him fool you, say those who have worked alongside him.

"I think Earl, if he has an ego, never lets it get in the way of what he's trying to do," said Sally Baker, who worked with Smith for nine years in the Colby communications department and took over as executive assistant to the president, Smith's position when he retired. "He's very self-effacing to the point where you can't believe it. He'll always tell you that he's not that smart . . . but he is all of those things but wants no credit for that."

Baker points to Smith's writing (she's a huge fan), his sense of humor, his patience as he listened to other points of view, his advocacy for Maine students, his sometimes-disguised but broad knowledge of history and politics and



literature. "He's got so many areas of interest," said Jim Crawford '64, chairman of the Board of Trustees. "When we were together this last weekend we were visiting the home of the original pastor who came to Blue Hill, Jonathan Fisher. We visited his house and it turned out Earl has some of Fisher's early paintings. . . . It seems that every time you turn around there's another thing that Earl knows something about."

Perhaps it is that broad perspective that makes him, as Crawford puts it, "wise in his counsel." In fact, Smith seems to float above the fray no matter how dire the crisis. Scott Bullock, president of MaineGeneral Medical Center, where Smith chaired the board of trustees (his list of civic posts, from state representative to school board chairman, runs half a page), counted him among his most trusted advisors, one of those people who bolster you when things get rough. "When all the arrows are zinging past your head, they sort of have a way of conveying to you that they've seen a lot in their time and this too shall pass," Bullock said.

Dean of Students Janice Kassman, who



worked alongside Smith for many years and reported to him for a time when he was dean of the college, referred to his "wonderful calming effect." The two rated problems on a scale of one to 10, and Kassman said Smith usually revised her estimation downward. "I'd think it was a nine and he'd say, 'Oh, no, that's a six.'"

Kassman said Smith, especially early in her career, was there for her to share many of the most important moments of her life, that she could go to him not only as a colleague but as a friend. "He never seems rushed. He never seems like you're bothering him. Whatever the issue was, he's right there for you. It's a gift."

Maybe it helps that Smith has, as Baker puts it, "his priorities in order."

Most important is his family, daughter Kelly, sons Jeff '85 and Mike '90. At the top



From top left: Earl Smith readies for yet another Colby commencement; Smith with former President Bill Cotter at the scene of the field house fire; Smith in Kenya, where he visited long-time friend Bill Mayaka '73 and his family; Smith as advisor to a student, a frequent role.



of that short list? His wife, Barbara. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody who loved anybody that much,” Baker said.

Working with Earl Smith, she said, “almost gave you hope that people were fundamentally good.”

And that belief, that there is goodness and potential in most people, that most problems pale if put in perspective, that sincere fondness for the College and what it does, does color Smith’s career and the swath he cut through Colby over four decades.

Over lunch at the Spa, he reminisced about the Colby he came to in 1962 and the “family” that welcomed him. “I knew them all and they were all older,” he said softly, with a tone of bemusement that is his trademark. “We built a house down here and Bill Millett came down with his car filled with silverware and had a surprise housewarming. It was just that kind of a place in those days. And I was the young pup and George Whalen (superintendent of Building and Grounds) used to come down and have dinner and talk with us and stay in the evening. There’s a man you would have adored.”

Smith described Whalen, his Land Rover, the sand box he had built for the Smith kids, the time he scrounged four discarded chairs for the Smith kitchen table, how he helped

build Fort Devens during World War II.

There were others. Bill Macomber. Earl McKeen. “You name these people,” Smith said. “God, they’re all dead.”

But they live in Smith’s affections and memories, which haven’t diminished over the decades.

“What is it that, when it’s all said and done, matters?” he said. “A lot of friends. Because of the transient nature of students and faculty you can’t be at a small place and get to know that number of people any other way on earth. If you worked at a factory somewhere, you would tend to know the same people. A college, you get to meet new people all the time. Where else can you do that?”

“And interesting people. Maybe that’s all anyone can ever accomplish. I don’t want to wax philosophical but it’s a comfort to have been at a place like this. You probably don’t ever leave it. You probably always have these ties and these friends.”

It’s a safe bet.

The same week, Barbara Smith sat at a table by the lunch counter at True’s Pharmacy in Oakland, near Belgrade where the Smiths live. She looked back over the decades, said you don’t expect to ever reach the time where you talk about retiring, about careers coming to

an end. It’s been a good life, from the mobile home in Brewer where she and Earl first lived, to the retirement parties, the reception at the museum of art.

It was about to end, at least that phase of her husband’s life, and she was a bit concerned. “I, personally, think it’s going to be hard,” she said. She has her friends; they talk and get together. “Maybe it’s different for a man, to call people, say, ‘Want to meet for lunch?’”

It may be that Smith won’t have to do all of the calling. Adams said he would miss having him as a “very confidential counselor. I can share things with him and open up to him in ways that I can’t with others,” he said.

But Adams said he hoped he could continue to “air things out” with the colleague who knew “when the noise was just loud and when it was serious.”

Cotter, from his Cambridge office, recalled the times he would walk into Smith’s office in Eustis to find the place already full. “Students, coaches, people from town, people I didn’t recognize that he was counseling about something,” he said.

Those friendships, like Smith’s ties to Colby, will live on, he predicted. “My guess is that people will continue to call Earl forever,” Cotter said. “And he will always answer.”