

Forty years of student service at DSU

The career of Dr. Wayne Blansett

BY ANGELA ROGALSKI
The Cleveland Current

Dr. Wayne Blansett, vice president of Student Affairs at Delta State University, will officially announce his retirement in June 2015. Blansett has served as one of the most respected leaders of the university for over four decades.

"It's been a 40-year journey for me," Blansett said. "I started in education when I was 23 years old and I have spent 40 great years at Delta State Uni-

versity. I'm one of those people that if you cut me, I'm going to bleed green. They say that if you enjoy your work enough, you'll never really work a day in your life. Then I've never worked a day in my life."

Blansett said his positions at Delta State, from assistant to the Dean of Students, director of Student Activities, associate Dean of Students, Dean of Student Affairs and finally, his current position, have been extremely enjoyable, bringing him fulfillment and satisfaction throughout his profes-

sional career. He also has faculty rank, being an associate professor of Education as well. And he definitely isn't retiring because he's tired of his job.

"I'm not retiring because I don't enjoy my work anymore," Blansett said. "I just felt like 40 years was the time to step aside, but I will miss it tremendously. I'm asked quite often am I retiring because of my health, and I give them a bit of a strange answer, I suppose, and say, 'Yes, I'm retiring be-



Dr. Wayne Blansett has made students and their futures a priority for 40 years.

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Armstrong paints through life



PRETTY AS A PICTURE: Nancy Armstrong utilizes her creative side to paint, pulling from her storied past.

Artist pulls from past to create future

BY JOY BETHEA
The Cleveland Current

"There's no feeling quite like walking into someone's home and seeing your art hanging on the wall," said Nancy Armstrong, a local artist with a flamboyant personality.

The pictures she referred to offer a glimpse into the spirit of the Delta by an artist who isn't just from the Delta, but in essence is the Delta. Armstrong's life, individuality and colorful history reflect the diverse, real culture of the Delta. She is the past and present, swirled into one vibrant woman.

Armstrong, who didn't begin painting until in her 40s, described her bold, bright style as "primitive." Her pieces depict scenes common to the Delta — country churches, townspeople and local shops. They tell rich stories of a simple life, an earthy com-

munity and a world that few people experience as vividly and as fully as does Armstrong.

She grew up on a working plantation in Waxhaw, located in Bolivar County, and easily recounted memories of cotton fields, of her grandmother putting away jams and jellies, and of hearing stories about people who walked the walk before. Mostly, she remembered a childhood full of music and adventure.

"Son Thomas was a regular at our house," Armstrong said of the famed blues musician. "He was a close friend of my father, and they often played together. My father played blues music before blues was ever cool."

Her father, she said, played about 13 instruments and was versed in bluegrass, gospel, blues, country, and rockabilly — a blend of bluegrass and rock. Armstrong inherited his appreciation for music, and counts attending live concerts around the South as

one of her favorite pastimes. She quickly added that she learned to appreciate new styles, too.

Armstrong was willing to try new things as well. "I was constantly around artist friends," she said, "so there were always paint and brushes nearby. Finally, someone told me, 'Just pick up a brush and give it a try.'"

In painting, she discovered a natural gifting, a hands-on, soothing outlet and a medium for telling the stories of her past.

The subjects of her paintings are eclectic, and yet each work unmistakably reflects the soul of the artist. In the same way, Armstrong's unique and diverse life points to the spirit of the Delta.

In addition to painting, she plays the drums during community jam sessions, writes occasionally, and

ARMSTRONG continued, **PAGE B2**

Mound Bayou resident pens book

Ivester discovers "The Outskirts of Hope"

BY AIMEE ROBINETTE
Editor, The Cleveland Current

Former Mound Bayou resident Jo Ivester set out to write a book with stories she knew firsthand.

It is considered a moving, inspirational memoir about how living and working in an all-black town during the height of the civil rights movement profoundly affected her entire family — and how they in turn impacted the community. "The Outskirts



Ivester Boston to manage a new clinic in Mound Bayou, the Delta Health Center, which still

stands near its original location just west of town. It was first built as part of President (Lyndon B.) Johnson's War on Poverty, after a national search determined that the worst poverty in the country was to be found in the black population of the Mississippi Delta," Ivester explained.

"Mound Bayou was selected as the center's site because it was viewed as the most secure location. Its nature as an all-black

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IVESTER

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town provided a much-needed cushion of safety.

“Within weeks of our arrival, my mother, Aura Kruger, was recruited to teach English at JFK High School, where she was the only white teacher. Although she struggled initially, often unable to even understand her students’ speech, she quickly found ways to connect, eventually becoming a beloved and sometimes controversial figure who introduced black literature into the curriculum of her English class and encouraged students to stand up for their rights,” she added.

Forty years later, her mother, then in her 80s and living with Ivester’s family in Austin, started a journal. “Every day she wrote for 20 minutes, and after several years, having amassed a pile of handwritten notebooks a foot high, she felt

her task was done; it was just the beginning for me. I spent over a thousand hours in the course of five years listening while she told and retold all the family anecdotes. It was my way of honoring her, of recognizing the importance of what she accomplished through her 20 years of teaching and of understanding how her experience in the classroom helped her to become the strong, independent woman I knew and loved,” she said.

At least the book started out that way.

“After working with my mother for several years to write her story, I realized that I also wanted to tell my own. For although I viewed our time in Mound Bayou as an adventure and the lessons I learned there helped mold me into the person I am today, there were significant difficulties. Nobody warned me that my tomboyish behavior could be misconstrued as an invitation to be touched inap-

propriately, even though I was only 10 years old,” she said. “My parents, caught up in their work, didn’t notice, so I was left to deal with it on my own. In more general terms, we gave lip service to understanding that we could be in physical danger, but nothing prepared me for the terror of having a rock thrown through my window, landing inches away from my head. Or for the trauma of leaving town earlier than planned after I was roughed up by four of the town’s teenagers, suffering a concussion, broken ribs, and contusions severe enough that I couldn’t walk.

“Although it was important to me to tell my family’s story, especially my mother’s, it was even more important to me to do so in a way that made it clear how much I both respected the people of Mound Bayou and recognized that prior to our arrival, the town had already achieved a great deal. It had its own school system where black children

could receive a good education. It hosted the Taborian Hospital, where black patients could be treated without having to wait while all the white patients were seen first. And it was relatively safe; the KKK kept its distance,” Ivester said. “The flip side of Mound Bayou being a safe haven was that many people, not wanting to make waves, were deeply disturbed by my mother teaching her students about Malcolm X or the Black Panthers. And, although Martin Luther King Jr. was revered by all, parents balked at my mother purchasing a classroom set of Dr. King’s book, ‘Chaos or Community.’ Some parents were even unnerved by the possibility of her teaching Shakespeare’s ‘Othello.’”

Ivester left Mound Bayou when she was 11 years old.

“Forty years later, when I was working on my manuscript, my editor said to me, ‘If you want to write an honest book about your family’s

time in Mississippi, you have to go back and interview people and immerse yourself in the setting,” she said. “Until she challenged me to return to the town where I’d spent two years of my childhood, I hadn’t realized how hesitant I was to do so. I was more than hesitant; I cringed at the thought, not wanting to risk spoiling the image to which I’d clung all those years. Had we just been tolerated, not accepted? Perhaps even worse, had we been forgotten? Adding to my reluctance was an unwillingness to return to the place where I’d been violently attacked.”

Despite her traumatic experience, Ivester still felt as if she were coming home when she returned to Mound Bayou.

“From the moment my childhood friend Clarence met me outside the Delta Health Center where he worked as a physical therapist, memories overwhelmed me. He was the ten-year-old who had let me

play football with his group of friends, thus ensuring me a place in the neighborhood. Upon my return, everywhere I went, there were people who knew me immediately, though several mistook me for my mother, given how much I looked the way she did when we were last there in the 1960s,” she said. “The high point of my visit occurred when Clarence brought me to see his parents, Preston and Pauline Holmes, who were my parents’ closest friends and bridge partners when we lived in Mound Bayou. As Mr. Holmes walked into the room and saw me, he held out his arms for a hug, saying, ‘I know who you are.’ But when he added, ‘My bid is two spades,’ I realized that he, like several others, thought I was my mother. The hug may have been meant for her, but I took it anyways. When he embraced me, I felt as if the whole town was welcoming me back.”

BLANSETT

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cause of my health. I’m retiring because my health is still good and I want to enjoy my retirement.”

Blansett said that over his 40 years of service to students at Delta State, he has so many wonderful memories that it’s hard to highlight just a few of them.

“People have asked me to choose one memory or a few that stand out in my mind,” he said. “It’s very hard to do that, because there have been so many great ones over the years. I think a highlight of my career is how much I’ve enjoyed working with students. I think the important thing in the job that I do is that you try to make a difference in young people’s lives. And if I’ve had some part in doing that, and I hope I have, then I’ve been successful. I love working with the students, and I get up every morning excited to go to work.”

Blansett credits his staff, too, for making his job effortless and gratifying and also praises the great leadership Delta State has had over the

years.

“I have an amazing staff, and they’re all just great people. I’ve also been very fortunate in that over the years, I’ve worked with some great presidents here at DSU,” he said. “When I came as a student, Dr. James Ewing was president during my undergraduate career and as an SGA officer (Student Government Association), and then Dr. Aubrey Lucas held that position. I also worked for 24 years for Dr. Kent Wyatt. Dr. Wyatt was a mentor and just someone who led me through. I worked for Dr. David Potter for about five years, then Dr. John Hilpert came in, and now I’m completing my second year under President Bill LaForge.”

Blansett said he and LaForge were longtime personal friends, as LaForge was his big brother in their college fraternity.

“We have a longtime personal relationship, and I have tremendous respect for him as a friend and a professional,” Blansett said. “And I believe Delta State has absolutely chosen the best person to lead this institution. He’s one of ours and a great leader and will take us to new

heights.”

LaForge also has enormous respect and admiration for Blansett.

“Dr. Wayne Blansett has been a significant player in the Delta State family for four decades,” LaForge said. “His outstanding service to Delta State in a number of positions in student affairs over the years reflects an enviable record of professionalism, dedication, and hard work. He has influenced the lives of thousands of students, and he has represented star quality in his profession as vice president for Student Affairs.

“It seems rare these days to find someone who has devoted his or her entire career to one institution or enterprise. Dr. Blansett came to Delta State as a student, and he basically never left. I am extremely proud of him and his career, and I am grateful to him for his years of devotion to his alma mater. No one loves the Green and White more than Wayne Blansett, and he will leave an imprint and legacy on this campus that will never be forgotten.”

Dr. Kent Wyatt, Blansett’s mentor and friend, and President Emeritus

of Delta State, said Dr. Wayne Blansett was an exceptional individual who always had the students’ best interests at heart.

“Dr. Blansett was an outstanding student at Delta State,” Wyatt said. “He has been a superlative vice-president of Student Affairs. He is an intellectual and energetic in his endeavors to help students in any way that he can while they’re at Delta State. He has done a superior job during his tenure at the university.”

Blansett said he and his wife, also a retired Delta State instructor, plan to travel and visit children and grandchildren after his retirement.

If there was one thing he’d like to leave behind when he closes his office door for the last time, Blansett said it would be a sense of family.

“My legacy, I hope, will be that I have inspired a sense of family between students and this office. We want our students to feel like a member of the Delta State family, and I always tried my best to develop that kind of relationship with them. And I know that will continue after I leave.”

ARMSTRONG

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teaches 4th grade math, science and Mississippi history in the same way that she wholehearted engages in her creative endeavors. And, she is a mother of three — two boys and a girl.

She laughed. “I’m a very hands-on teacher,” she said, “especially when teaching Mississippi history.” Her classes visit historical landmarks, produce their own musicals and hear stories about the past, just as Armstrong grew up hearing about the people who lived before.

She cares about her students’ lives, and strives to engage them outside the classroom, maybe too much sometimes, she added.

“But the feeling of making a difference, it’s the greatest feeling in the world,” she said.



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