Climbing ladders, beating the odds and overcoming adversity are all facets of the American dream that make a story worth telling and a life worth living. And if those elements add to the appeal of a tale, then Pat Whetstone's life is an attractive one.

Today, Whetstone is the director of The University of Alabama's Office of Alumni Affairs, and executive secretary of the National Alumni Association, comprised of approximately 30,000 members across the United States. For the past 20 years he's been a commanding officer of sorts, guiding the NAA and those who lead it toward development and growth.

His current position is not one many saw coming when he was a boy growing up in Greenville, Ala., population 7,228, according to a recent count. He came from a modest background; his parents were both public school teachers, and he was the oldest of seven children.

But humble beginnings never fazed any of them, especially Whetstone. “I just sort of knew when I graduated high school that I’d be coming here,” he said of his alma mater. In fact, he received the W.O. Parmer Scholarship, given annually to a Butler County student. It wasn’t until years later when he became involved with the scholarship’s advisory committee that he learned why he had been so lucky. “You had to be a young man from a relatively poor family who showed promise,” he said. “And I laughed when I heard that criteria, because I didn’t know I fell in either category.”

Whetstone said he and his siblings never considered themselves poor. “We didn’t have much, but we didn’t know it,” he said. “Nine of us lived in a three-bedroom house with one bathroom. So when I came off to Alabama and got one of those little-bitty dorm rooms, I thought I’d hit the jackpot.”

His colleagues and friends insist the reverse is true. It was the University that was the winner when he became director, which is why many will be so sad to see him go when he retires this spring.

“Pat Whetstone has led the National Alumni Association with vision, effective leadership and dedication,” said UA President Robert E. Witt. “But above all, he has led the NAA with heart: a heart filled with love for The University of Alabama and all of the people, programs, values and traditions that make our University truly special.” In February, Whetstone was awarded the AlgerNON Sydney Sullivan Award, one of UA’s highest honors, given to individuals who have demonstrated the highest standards of scholarship, leadership and service.

Whetstone said he has enjoyed his job as director immensely, but the time is right to go. “I would have been stunned years ago that I would have lasted 20 years,” he said. “The enemy is not at the gate, so maybe that’s a good time to retire, when things are right.”

To an alumni office that has come to rely on him, however, there never will be a good time. “He’s my boss, but he’s also one of my best friends,” said Dianne Golson, who has been Whetstone’s assistant since he took his post as director. “I’ve been very sad since we’ve returned from the Christmas holiday, because I know time is going to fly until he leaves us. And the whole staff feels that way. We’ve been a good team.”
other girl, but my efforts were success-
ful.” The two married in June 1962.
The pair’s studies were interrupted when, after three years at UA, Whet-
stone was called into service as an Army paraatrooper with the 101st Airborne
Division. The couple later returned to campus to finish their studies, and
Whetstone buckled down in the classroom. “I found out when I came back,
that college is not that hard,” he said. “I was stunned. It was so much harder
the way I was trying to do it before.”

After he and Joyce graduated in
1966, Whetstone went to work for
Johnson & Johnson. They moved fre-
quently, living in Georgia, Tennessee,
Texas and the Carolinas over the years,
but they always took care to keep their
roots to UA. “We were transferred all
over the country, but in every single
place we joined the Alumni Associa-
tion, even when we didn’t have any
money,” Joyce said.

“We did it because we thought we
were supposed to,” said Whetstone, who
served as the Knoxville, Tenn., chapter’s
president at one point. “I remember that
feeling—it was like an obligation.”

When his company decided to send
him to New Jersey, though, he decided
it was time to go a different direction,
literally. He took a job at First Tennes-
see Bank, and he was elected a regional
vice president of the NAA.

Yet again, he learned he’d be mov-
ing. When he called Alumni Hall to
inform the staff he’d need to be replaced,
someone suggested he interview for an
opening in the UA Planned Giving
division. “In the middle of the inter-
view, I realized that was not the job for
me,” he said. “So I just thanked them for
inviting me, and told them they really
needed somebody else.”

His interviewers weren’t ready to
give up on him yet. They informed him
of an opening for an Alumni Fund posi-
tion, and interviewed him on the spot.
He went on to do a final interview with
Dr. John L. Blackburn, who’d been dean
of men during Whetstone’s time as a
student.

Unfortunately, the gentlemen had
history.

In college, Whetstone had been
required to work off demerits he’d gotten
for misbehaving, and he’d had to report to Blackburn every week for a
month about his progress. “Meanwhile,
here I am as a grown up, and he’s try-
ing to remember me,” Whetstone said.
“He came up with wrong things that I’d
done, so I denied it fervently. He knew
I had been in his office, but he just
couldn’t place it.”

A few weeks later, Whetstone found
himself coming back to where he began,
not as a mischievous freshman, but as an
adult with big responsibilities.

DOWN TO BUSINESS

He took his post in the Alumni Fund
Department in 1988, and three years
later he was chosen as director of Alumni
Affairs. He is the longest-serving direc-
tor since Jeff Coleman, who was at the
helm from 1954 to 1974.

During Whetstone’s reign, the Alumni Association has
grown and evolved for the better. After his first year as
director, its total assets reached not quite $1 mil-
lion. “Today we have assets of approximately $34 million,
and most of that is scholarship endowment,” he said,
noting the association has aimed to respond to the need
to expand UA’s scholarship program.

Among his biggest achievements,
said, was helping to keep the alumni
staff and executive committee focused
on the needs of alumni, prospective stu-
dents and the University, and UA Pro-
vost Judy Bonner agreed. “Whenever we
discuss a new initiative that is important
to the University, Pat is the first to vol-
unteer to deal with the students and the
staff,” she said.

For example, when Witt set a goal for
enrollment growth, Bonner said Whet-
stone looked for ways the NAA could help. “The alumni chapters around the
country work with our regional recruit-
ners to identify and educate prospective
students,” she explained. “Our current
students and the University are the
beneficiaries of this strong working rela-
tionship.”

Now the association, Alumni Hall
staff and other campus leaders will
need to adjust to Whetstone’s depar-
ture, which he revealed in September.
“I tell everyone that when I told the
staff about my retirement, that they all
stood and applauded and jumped up and
started bawling hips. I like that story
better than the real story.”

He’d informed Witt months earlier,
and he’d given Golson an idea of the
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Sporting a pair of hand-me-down jeans
from cousin Jimmy Andrew in 1960; below, with daughter Paige in 1969
news before his announce-ment. “I was thinking that I was slowing down just a touch,” he said, noting he’d be tired after staying out three consecutive nights, something that never used to happen. “I had thought about what I was going to do with my time, and by the time I spoke with President Witt and met with the exec-utive committee and staff, I was very comfortable with my decision, and still am.”

His plans for retirement include traveling with Joyce, taking continuing education classes, studying history and watching hummingbirds on his hummingbird feeder. “I have built a campfire that I can warm myself by.”

WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Though many factors contributed to his successful career, Whetstone considers his background the most critical ingre-dient. His small high school allowed him to play football, baseball, basketball, run track and serve as president of the student government, all while tak-ing care of his siblings. “Being the oldest child, I was responsible for my brothers and sisters, the one that handed out nickels and dimes and was in charge of money,” he said. “And I think that influenced me quite a bit. I had to do it the right way, otherwise, my parents would be bitterly disappointed.”

The people he met along the way also influenced him. “When I was in school, a lot of my teachers had fought in World War II,” he said. “They were good role models for guys in class to look up to.”

And then, there was Joyce. “He has it is to become cynical about youth,” he said. “But if you work on a campus like this, it’s impossible to become cynical. You meet the finest young people.”

FULL CIRCLE

Golson said it would be hard to stay without Whetstone, but she under-stands why it’s time for him to go. “He is very dedicated, and he has a hard job,” she said. “A lot of people don’t realize how difficult this job can be sometimes; but he always knows how to balance it.”

That balance is due in no small part to Whetstone’s humor, which all who’ve met him can attest to. “I have tried to not take myself too seriously, but I have tried to take this job very seriously,” he said. That attitude has proven to be the perfect ingredient to garnering not only members, but respect for the NAA. “Pat has been a wonderful ambassador for The University of Alabama for his entire 20-plus-year career. His charm, wit and wisdom have served the Uni-versity well,” Shurett said, adding that his unique blend of humor and tact has been indispensable.

Just as Whetstone has made new connections, he has also reconnected to not only his alma mater, but his home-town as well. “I had a chance to go back to Greenville recently and speak to the Rotary Club,” he said. “I rode by the little house we grew up in, and I was stunned at how small it was. But it was really neat.”

Something he considers even nearer is what happened to his brothers and sis-ters. “I look at my siblings that followed me out of that house, and all of them are better-educated than I am, and that makes me proud,” he said. “I’m proud of my parents for encouraging that and proud of them.”

And that’s the same way his UA family feels about him. “He’s one of a kind,” Golson said. “His many friends wish him the best on retiring.” Shurett said. “He will enjoy his time and his family, and because of his great love for the University, he’ll continue to be active however he chooses.”

Whetstone is certain he’ll stay involved in at least one way. “I’ll still be at football games, but in the upper deck in the end zone now,” he said. “But I’ve got plenty of sunscreen, so I’ll be okay.”

Lauren Cabral, ‘10, is a reporter for the Killeen (Texas) Daily Herald.