Seahawk pride has no expiration date

Fifty years ago, when the towering oaks that now shade Hoggard Lawn were just saplings, the first four-year class graduated from what was then Wilmington College. The Class of 1965 was a part of a wealth of historic changes, both on campus and in the world at large.

by Marybeth Bianchi and Andrea Monroe Weaver
“YESTERDAY, all my troubles seemed so far away... oh, I believe in yesterday.

“YESTERDAY” by The Beatles, Released in 1965

The modern university that UNCW has become took root while the Class of 1965 was on campus, when the College Road location was new (the groundbreaking was held in 1961), and the traditions of a four-year university were just starting to take shape.

At Wilmington College, the student editors of the Fledgling, the college yearbook, showed their pride for the growing campus in photos celebrating the construction of new buildings. In 1965, the Seahawks played their basketball games in a brand new gymnasium, later named Hanover Hall. That same year, the college held a groundbreaking ceremony for Kenan Hall, named for benefactor Sarah Graham Kenan, and established the Wrightsville Marine Biomedical Laboratory, a precursor to the Center for Marine Science, now part of CREST Research Park.
Back in 1965, the college held commencement ceremonies in June. Then-Lt. Gov. Robert Scott delivered the commencement address for the 72 members of the Class of 1965. Fourteen students received the first teaching certificates issued by the college. Two students received degree distinctions: Bonnie Sullivan Daniel, magna cum laude, and Ron Mihal, cum laude. In May 2015, 565 students graduated with distinction.

Harvey T. Covil received the Hoggard Medal for Achievement, given to the senior who demonstrated the most improvement. The award – named for legendary Wilmington College President John T. Hoggard, who died in 1965 – remains one of the highest honors the university bestows.

“We were extremely proud to have been the first four-year graduates from this campus,” said Al Corbett, who went on to join his family business, Corbett Package Co. “My best memories were celebrating our national baseball champs, participating in fraternity life, observing campus building growth, learning from great professors and developing lifelong friends.” (The Seahawk baseball team won the National Junior College World Series in 1961 and 1963.)

Grady Conner, who maintains his university connection through the alumni association’s Triangle Chapter, remembered that UNCW supported non-traditional students then just as the university does now, helping them balance the demands of work, school and life.

“The Class of 1965 was small and mostly from southeastern North Carolina,” he recalled. “Those from outside of the area lived off campus, usually at the beach. Many worked part-time and adjusted their classes and activities so they could work.”

Ron Staton, who earned both an associate’s degree and a bachelor’s degree from Wilmington College, said it was an accounting class with Anne Barkdale that cemented the foundation for his career as a certified public accountant. He remembers that the business program, which evolved into the Cameron School of Business in 1979, focused on helping students succeed after graduation.

“We ran our own placement service,” he said. “We were allowed to mail out invitations to interview on the dean’s letterhead.”

“I have remained involved (at UNCW) because of the quality of graduates,” said Staton, who has been active with the alumni association as well as the business school and contributes to numerous scholarships.

Corbett, too, has been steadfast in his support of the university over the decades, serving on the university’s Board of Trustees, Foundation Board, Seahawk Club board and alumni association board and supporting established scholarships. “We share the pride of being UNCW Seahawks,” he said.

Fifty years and thousands of graduates later, UNCW remains committed to its core mission to enhance students’ lives through education, according to alumni like Corbett, Staton and Conner. Each one credits the faculty and staff of Wilmington College with preparing them for the opportunity to “pursue their dreams and lead productive and fulfilling lives,” Conner said. “UNCW is a great university, and it is getting better each year.”

Imagine the year 2065. Those stately oaks that shade Hoggard Lawn will be 100 years old. The Class of 2015 will return to campus for Homecoming or Family and Alumni Weekend, and they will remember their favorite faculty, their friends and the fundamental ways their alma mater changed their lives and they, too, will celebrate the timeless pride of being Seahawks.

Photos: University Archives. Not all of the 1965 seniors are represented.
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