

The Adventurer

Ever since he arrived at Vanguard straight from a small village in West Africa in 1955, Dennis McNutt has shown a penchant for adventure and invention. For 35 years he was a professor of history and political science, a faculty spokesman and (most importantly to some) founder of Noon Hoops, a tradition that has been carried on without a break since 1966. Outside of the classroom McNutt distinguished himself in amateur photography, studying under Ansel Adams in the 1980s and being invited to teach at the Ansel Adams workshop in 2003. Now he has come out of retirement to serve Vanguard as associate provost, and a new generation of students is being shaped by his relentless inquiry into All Things Interesting.

“I suffer from terminal curiosity,” McNutt says, having just postponed an interview in favor of a stand-up bass lesson, his new passion.

For 35 years, he provoked that same curiosity in students.

“My goal was to make them qualified to learn on their own for the rest of their lives,” he says. “Most students come in wanting you to give them baskets of facts. I advised them instead to ask the right question and assess the evidence that answers the question. That’s the difference between higher education and training. I’m in the business of giving students skills that allow them to think their way through Christian professional life.”

McNutt, the son of missionaries, was born in Compton and completed high school by correspondence while living in the African bush. He, his father and brothers fed the family there by hunting hippos, antelope, warthogs and geese. At 14, when crocodiles were attacking the carcass of a rogue hippo his father had shot in a river, McNutt perched in a tree with a rifle and shot at them to protect the villagers as they hacked at the carcass with their machetes.

He left the country of Togo for VU and found himself in the classroom the day he landed in southern California.

“I knew all kinds of stuff about termites, weather, snakes, and nothing about carburetors and cool things to say to the girls,” he says. “I was typical of a lot of MK’s who come out of the bush. I was socially awkward, shy, but eager to participate in campus life.”

He married Vanguard coed Charlotte Hastings at the end of his sophomore year, and later graduated with two BAs in social science and theology. He then earned a PhD in political science from Claremont Graduate University and began preparing to work for the CIA which had offered him a job as African affairs specialist.



“Intelligence work was something I really wanted to do,” he says. “It promised a lot of adventure.”

But VU president O. Cope Budge encouraged him to try teaching, so the CIA kept the job open for two years while McNutt lectured in a classroom. Soon he decided that working for the agency would be too hard on his marriage, so he took a position as assistant professor of history and political science at VU in '66. He was among a group of other “young turks” hired by Budge at the time.

“We were more brash than wise, ready to challenge the establishment,” says McNutt. “It was a fascinating environment to be in; a time of real optimism about making this a first-rate college. It was a major period of deepening of the academic culture.”

It didn’t take long for McNutt to transform himself from lecturer to “provoker of learning,” a phrase he wants to appear on his gravestone.

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"If I get up in front of students and announce great pieces of wisdom, nothing has happened other than showing what I know," he says. "The measure of a college professor is not that he professes, but what his students have learned. Over the years I moved away from lecturing entirely to a format where the students do most of the learning on their own, and when they come to class we work over, refine and sharpen what they learned. I perform like a coach."

He taught U.S. government, international politics, macroeconomics, African history, U.S. foreign policy and his special favorite, the social functions of secrecy.

But an accomplishment which gives him great satisfaction is not well known. For 25 years he was VU's accreditation liaison officer to the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). Ten years ago, the WASC leadership tried to force church-related institutions to hire and facilitate the lifestyles of homosexual students and staff, which would have forced some schools to compromise their values. McNutt organized a resistance coalition of evangelical, Catholic, Jewish and secular schools.

"It was a major battle, and we won an all-but-unconditional surrender" which forced the resignation of the executive director of WASC and prompted a rewrite of the standards of accreditation, he says

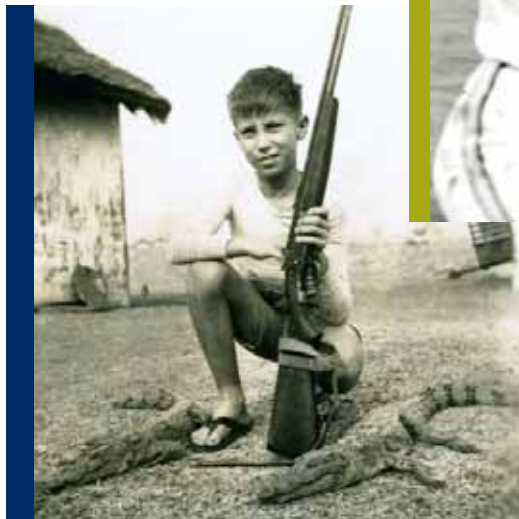
"It was satisfying because as a political scientist, I think about how power is used and how you respond to it when it's used against you," he says. "I felt I'd used power properly."

In private life, McNutt excelled as a photographer. He invented a complex technique for making prints, and the method was published in magazines for advanced amateurs and professionals. In the '80s McNutt was invited to study with Ansel Adams in his workshop in Yosemite Valley, in spite of having no formal training. In 2003 he was invited to teach an Ansel Adams workshop in Adams' own darkroom.

McNutt also loves high-altitude hiking.

"There's no way you can be in the high mountains and feel self-important," he says. "I see all God's handiwork and feel lost in the magnificence of creation. And I'm always looking for good landscape photographs."

He still hikes at high altitudes — 14,161-foot Mt. Shasta a couple of years ago (which is dangerous only "if you stumble and don't get your ice axe in quick enough," he says). Last year he began planning a trip to climb 20,000-foot peaks outside of



(left) McNutt in Togo, after a hunt; (above) as part of the undefeated Vanguard football team of 1958-59.

La Paz, Bolivia. His ascent of Mt. Kilimanjaro with VU provost Russ Spittler 30 years ago has become part of VU lore.

Sports remain a major part of McNutt's life. At VU he played football on a team which went undefeated, basketball, baseball and ran on the track team, which won the league championship. He has pitched in fast-pitch softball leagues for twenty years. Most famously, he started "Holy Hour," also known as Noon Hoops, which brings faculty, students, staff and alums together three times a week for pick-up games in the gym.

Dennis and Charlotte, an elementary school teacher and VU adjunct professor, had three daughters — all VU alums — and eight grandkids. Dennis taught one of his granddaughters in an undergraduate government class before he retired from teaching. He and Charlotte intended to retire together and travel the world. But in 2002 Charlotte passed away unexpectedly after a surgery, and suddenly Dennis was jobless and alone.

"I was in a deep funk," he says.

In October 2003, provost Russ Spittler asked him to come out of retirement as his associate provost. Then McNutt married Barbara Severn, whose late husband

Bill had been the quarterback of the VU football team.

"My life turned to joy," Dennis says.

Today, he's happy to be working with students again.

"Every year I make good friends with new students," he says. "We go hiking and skiing together. It's a wonderful chance to be enlivened by the youthful idealism of college kids. They help keep you young."

John Leverett, former chair of the music department and longtime colleague of McNutt's, says McNutt earned a reputation for fairness, unwavering curiosity and high standards.

"I was often impressed at his insight into a situation," says Leverett. "He looks at all sides of an argument before he makes a statement. He explores an area until it's exhausted, then moves on."

Leverett says he and others have relied on McNutt's advice and friendship during difficult times.

"I could count on him to be there. You don't find friends like that very often," he says. "He was known as a difficult teacher, but most students loved him for it. He pushed the college, the students and himself to excellence." 