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Felley Lawson

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Reflections on the X factor (Ouachita fosters deep bonds, complex community)

By Felley Lawson

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For more information, contact Ouachita's Office of Communications & Marketing at comm-mark@obu.edu or (870) 245-5206.

When Ouachita turned 100, the marketing around the 1986 centennial celebration promised that the university offers The Best of Life – an audacious claim, if you think about it. As a student, though, I wouldn't have pushed back on it. Life on campus was the best I could imagine right then, or ever.

The singular experience of attending Ouachita shaped me at my core. It afforded me an outstanding liberal arts education provided by accomplished, accessible professors who were preternaturally genius at striking the delicate balance between nurturing and challenging their students. They cared if I showed up, helped me find direction, taught me to think for myself, encouraged me to know Jesus.

On a walkable campus, mandatory dorm living and meals in a common cafeteria meant there were people around, quite literally, all the time. Engaging with one another was unavoidable, in the best way. Ongoing conversations about everything and nothing were multiplied exponentially, infusing friendships with longevity, durability and context for a vast supply of inside jokes. A common history evolved, with its own soundtrack, rhythm, landmarks and vocabulary.

During nine semesters, I had three work study placements to help pay tuition. A lot of people went out of their way to be sure each of those jobs also built my communications skill set. And I'm one of many mass communications majors who graduated owing a huge debt to the late Dr. Bill Downs. Personally, I have him to thank for raging PTSD triggered to this day by the sight of a red Flair pen. On the upside, I grew to believe in myself because he believed in me first. So I'll take the win.

All of this is very on-brand for Ouachita; as a student, accepting that it offered The Best of Life wasn't a stretch.

But at 21, there's no way to appreciate what The Best of Life even means, because there's no way to see what's ahead. I also thought Cap'n Crunch was The Best of Food and VCRs were The Best of Investments. Perspective is everything.

Life in the Ouachita bubble can be amazing, but it's only an introduction to the Ouachita story.

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"Later chapters reveal that because of the unique way we engage with Ouachita as students, there's a specific way it stays with us, connects us, becomes part of who we are intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. Relationships born on campus gift us with friends who become our family. They stand with us, look out for us, celebrate our big moments, mourn with us when our hearts break. They show up first, whether it's time for a pep talk, straight talk or circling the wagons.

In our professional worlds, at church or when we're new to town, we can forge deep bonds among casual acquaintances or even strangers with whom we have only Ouachita in common. Ouachita gives us shared traditions, language, community, sense of purpose. It belongs to us. What it offers is impossible to duplicate.

If we can't define the Ouachita X factor, we know it when we feel it – as we might, if we're totally honest, whenever we pull up anywhere in the country behind someone with a Ouachita specialty license plate and irrationally become a tiny bit excited because we're sure the driver will be someone we know.

On the plaza outside Evans Student Center, there's a "Greetings from Ouachita" mural designed by the fantastically talented Grace Avery '22. It almost covers one of the exterior walls that connects the student center to Mabee Fine Arts Center and is a favorite campus photo spot.

It's basically a giant, vinyl serotonin boost. Everybody loves it: friends, families, current Tigers, future Tigers, Gold Tigers. From my office window, nearly every day I see this irresistible photo op attract a very steady stream of people. Their near-unanimous response to the mural is pure joy.

At the same time, they each have a unique story. Whatever brought them to Ouachita in the first place – whatever brings any of us here – made a particular impression.

Shared experiences obviously impact us differently. Some might say their feelings about Ouachita are complicated. Maybe yours are, too. Even The Best of Life rarely involves only The Simplest of Feelings. Just as our favorite professors balanced encouragement and critique in their classrooms, complexity can coexist with love for Ouachita. Engaging with both can make our community stronger.

That community means everything to me. It's a gift, one of the many ways Ouachita has delivered on the promise to provide The Best of Life – a promise which, as it turns out, is not such an audacious claim after all.



By Felley (Nall) Lawson '88, editorial coordinator