Mr. Jim Blanton, Retiring President of BCCC

By Crystal Spencer and Darleen Smith

Introduction

By Crystal Spencer

On a beautiful, warm “Down East” North Carolina January day, Life on the Pamlico students Crystal Spencer and Darleen Smith, along with advisor Roy Armstrong, went to interview the retiring president of Beaufort County Community College, Mr. Jim Blanton.

The weather was auspicious for the occasion. The clouds in the powder-blue sky were puffs of white smoke. The bright sun shone down, warming the gentle southeastern breezes, as we walked across the beautiful campus—most of which has been constructed during Mr. Blanton’s tenure—to his office in the administration building.

Mrs. Caroline Cox ushered us into Mr. Blanton’s office. A tall, slim, silver-haired man with a friendly face, he offered us chairs. We were immediately at ease in the presence of this charming, easy-going gentleman. We began the interview by asking him about his upbringing.
Retiring president James Blanton with Life on the Pamlico students Crystal Spencer and Darleen Smith

*Life:* First of all, we’d like to know a little about your upbringing.

*Mr. Blanton:* Well, I was born in Duplin County, in a small community called Teachey. The Wallace Rose Hill High School is located there. I did not go to that high school. I went
to Wallace High, after which I went to Wake Forest College and did my undergraduate work. Having finished, I went into the military, attached with the first Marine division. I was in Korea twice and have fond memories of that but would rather jump off the Empire State Building than to go back although I would take nothing for the experience I did have.

After getting out of service, I came to Bath [N. C.] and started teaching in 1954. I married a Beaufort County resident and have been here ever since. So I’ve been here since, which is 36 years.

*Life*: What did you major in and what did you teach?

*Mr. Blanton*: I majored in science, biology, and chemistry; and I had enough physics to qualify to teach. I taught biology and chemistry at Bath. After two years there, I moved to Washington and was the head of the Science Department, teaching chemistry and physics, some biology over the years but mostly chemistry and physics. I was with them about 12 years. Back then our school year was only nine months, and we had three months off during the summers. So I used many of those summers going to summer school. I went to East Carolina [University] and started working on my masters. I went to Duke to take specialized courses in physics and ended up getting my masters in administration from East Carolina. Several of the summers I spent improving my knowledge of chemistry and physics. I went to Duke for two summers, one after I had my masters. I went to the University of New Mexico one summer because they had a special chemistry program. I taught at EC [East Carolina University] one summer. I attended State College [N. C. State University now] some and the University of Florida one summer.

*Life*: You covered the whole continent, didn’t you?
Mr. Blanton: There was another place, but I don’t remember. I haven’t looked at my records lately—I haven’t been applying for jobs.

I enjoyed my teaching experience. I put my whole self into it. And it’s an awfully hard life. But I really did enjoy it, and I have sat back and watched some of my former students become doctors and lawyers and nuclear physicists, etc. It’s a joy to see them develop into real top-notch professionals!

I came to Beaufort Technical Institute in 1968 and will have been here 22 years when I retire. I have been president for only 19 years.

Life: Did you come as an instructor?

Mr. Blanton: I came as an assistant to the president and taught physics for one year. Then I became Dean of Instruction and was Dean of Instruction for about two and a half years. In ’71 when Dr. Byrd left, I became president.

Life: With all the knowledge you seemed to have accumulated in the sciences, why did you choose to become president instead of a nuclear physicist or something else?

Mr. Blanton: Well, I enjoy people and a direct relationship with people. If you work in a laboratory as a chemist or nuclear physicist, you’re isolated from people. I just didn’t choose to go that route. I’m not sure I would have made a nuclear physicist anyway.

Life: What have been the most significant changes since you became president?

Mr. Blanton: Our size has changed tremendously. We had about 64 [students] our first year. In ’69 we had about 120. But the size now is very close to 1500 full-time equivalent students. [Eight to ten thousand actual full- and part-time students constitute the equivalent of 1500 full-time students.]

We certainly have improved in quality. I think we have a high quality school. I’m familiar with the presidents of the other 57 institutions in the state and community college system. I would not trade what we have at Beaufort for any of them. I certainly would not trade my faculty because I think we have an outstanding faculty. As to the quality of our programs, I would challenge any of them to do as well.

Life: Do you feel that the curriculum has changed from a technical to a liberal arts program?

Mr. Blanton: It has some, not that we were trying to move into this direction particularly. But our vocational program has decreased in enrollment.

Life: Why do you think that is so?

Mr. Blanton: I don’t know because for many years our enrollment pretty much paralleled the unemployment rate. When it was high, our enrollment was high, and for a good number of years the vocational programs had a high enrollment because the unemployment rate was high. For the last few years our unemployment rate has been very low, yet we have continued to grow slowly. Our growth now is in our college transfer program and not the vocational. As you probably saw in the paper, we had to cut out some programs this year because the number of students was not sufficient to maintain the programs. It just was not economical to offer the classes.

Life: Do you see that there is a lot of comment or concern that the four-year schools are admitting a lot of people who are not ready for college, and do you see that the college transfer
program, not only here but in the community college system, will start attracting people who want to go to four-year schools but aren’t quite ready to go to East Carolina, Carolina, dor State right away because of deficiencies of whatever degree in reading or math?

Mr. Blanton: Dr. Armstrong, I, first of all, do not think the university system should be in remedial work. We spend in taxpayers’ money about eight million dollars a year in the university system on remedial work. The community college system is geared up for that, and I do think somewhere along the way, perhaps maybe during the ’90’s, our legislators will see that remedial courses should probably be assigned to the community college system and the university system will no longer offer them.

Life: The universities wouldn’t accept the students?

Mr. Blanton: Unless they were really qualified. I do think that during the ’90’s we will see the entry requirements for the university system increase a great deal and tuition increase a great deal. Those two factors alone are going to force more people to come to the community college for the first two years. Our public schools are decreasing in the number [of students]. So, of the three systems—the public schools, the university system, and community college system—I see a good bit of growth for the community college system in the next few years.

Life: Do you have a view as to why the community college system hasn’t been getting these people who logically should go there?

Mr. Blanton: Since the community college system is the new component of the educational system in North Carolina, I think it has taken the general public a few years to become familiar with the quality of what we do. Also, society itself, especially our young people, have clung to the idea of the prestige in going to a four-year college or university [in contrast to a two-year school]. I think people now are beginning to appreciate the quality of what the community college system is doing and more and more will be coming here to get their first two years here.

Life: This could be a real boom.

Mr. Blanton: Yes, it could, and I think during the ’90’s we’ll see a boom that we have not seen recently because of several factors. I said earlier that the public schools were decreasing, which means the potential for recruiting a high school graduate will not be as great as in the past. But we will see more people 20 years old and older coming back to get their four-year degrees, starting with us or other community colleges.

Life: Do you think that the college transfer area then will become the dominant area?

Mr. Blanton: I think it will grow. I’m not sure that it will become the dominant area because from what I read and hear from those speaking about the economy on projections for the future, it seems that our society is moving more and more to a very technological type of society. So I think our technical programs will grow maybe equally with our college transfer. I think we will be heavy in the not very “high” tech programs but in technology in general because, as all of our young people know, we’ve moved from the agrarian or agricultural society into a manufacturing society, and now we’ve moved into more of a service-oriented society so that by the year 2000 our society is going to be extremely heavy in the service jobs.

Life: I was reading in a Raleigh paper that in the crafts in our state, like carpentry and plumbing, the median age for a
carpenter is in his late 50's. They're talking about an experienced carpenter, someone who knows what he is doing. Another area was auto mechanics; they were pointing out that in this kind of job, a "dirty hands" kind of job, the money is better than in the more prestigious jobs.

Mr. Blanton: Yes. Right now, many places are starting auto mechanics at $30,000 a year because the work has become so specialized in the last few years. There is no such thing as a "shade tree" mechanic anymore.

Life: They were pointing out in this article that there aren't many people who can do these kinds of specialized craft jobs.

Mr. Blanton: It's a concern for all of us because as I have said many times, I don't know what will happen ten years from now when we need a plumber or a carpenter, air conditioning or heating technician. It's going to be extremely difficult to get people with the knowledge in these skills.

Life: The number of workers in these areas is declining, right?

Mr. Blanton: Yes. But I think there will be a turnaround. That's why I said I think we'll be heavy in technical programs. They will start picking back up. The society will demand it by paying more. Down the road, a plumber may make more than a doctor.

Life: When I moved to Bath, the first guy I wanted to get was the plumber. Then I wanted to get the air conditioning and heating man, and then an electrician and later an auto mechanic. When you need them, you are willing to pay anything for them.

Mr. Blanton: Yes. They're harder to find than doctors. Our automotive mechanics have changed very much over the years. Last year, simply because technology has changed, we have had to move to a two-year automotive program. It takes a pretty sharp youngster to handle automotive mechanics. First of all, the repair manuals that are used in garages and repair shops are written at about a 13th and 14th grade level, two grades higher than high school. So you have to be almost an associate's degree graduate to really comprehend the repair manual. Well, we changed it to two years because of technology and specialization. Our automotive dealers in the area are working with us more than ever because they need trained mechanics so badly. We have a co-op program where the students will be in school a quarter and work with industry a quarter. This will help.

Life: Is that program thriving?

Mr. Blanton: Yes. It is doing real well this year, and I think it will probably grow even more next year. When some of these young men and women get out, they're going to be able to command much better salaries than five years ago.

Life: I know several builders who need trained carpenters, but I guess it's hard to get young people to apply for carpentry here?

Mr. Blanton: It is. Young people have a tendency to think in terms of white collar and blue collar jobs and not the type you mentioned a while ago about getting your hands dirty.

Life: Ironically they can make considerably more money in those areas than they can in the other areas.

Mr. Blanton: There will be a turnaround because it's almost back to where it is not just a skill but a service. Somebody has to serve our communities with plumbing problems, electrical and heating problems, masonry problems, and we're going to have to have trained specialists. So over the years society will
be willing to pay a whole lot more for their services, and more people will go into them.

*Life*: How about the average age of students? In your opinion, has it been about the same?

*Mr. Blanton*: No, it has increased. When we first started off, the average age was 22-24 for the first few years. It’s about 28-29 now. In the ’90’s, I think it will rise to about 30-32. Also, there are more female students now than there were ten years ago.

*Life*: Why do you think that is?

*Mr. Blanton*: Our work force itself is changing. Society is changing its feelings toward the working woman.

*Life*: You’ve seen that change, haven’t you?

*Mr. Blanton*: Yes. Back when I started off, women taught school and were nurses, but there were very few professions that women went into, very few, if any, female doctors. I can’t even remember a female lawyer.

*Life*: One of the real changes is in pharmacy school where 75% of the school is female.

*Mr. Blanton*: That’s a very good profession for women.

*Life*: They can adjust their hours.

*Mr. Blanton*: And with the cost of everything, most households have to have two salaries coming in. It’s highly expensive to maintain a home with children; it’s a necessity now to have two incomes.

*Life*: During your time here as president what are you most proud of?

*Mr. Blanton*: I guess I’m most proud of the quality of what we do. I have seen it improve over the years.

*Life*: In instruction?

*Mr. Blanton*: Yes. I’m proud of the buildings that we have on campus because that has been a hard task. We’ve had two small bond referendums, and they were hardly enough to build a building. So we’ve had to rely on other sources of funds. Rather than continue to try to drain funds from our community, I’ve spent much time trying to get federal and state funds. We probably have as few county funds in our campus as any institution across this state. There’s another building I’d like to see: that’s our continuing education building for which we have plans ready. We hope our general assembly will be able to find funds this year, but the budget looks mighty bleak.

*Life*: It always does.

*Mr. Blanton*: Mrs. [Betty] Cochran [Chairperson of General Education at BCCC] was in the other day; we were talking about something, and I said, “You know, every year we are sort of built up with the hope that the community college system will get a few more equipment dollars and we’ll be able to raise the faculty salary level. North Carolina community college faculty’s salary is the lowest in the Southeast. We really have few equipment dollars, and when the legislative session is beginning to finish and we see that we’re not going to be able to get the funds, our dreams are set for the next year, and when it doesn’t happen, it deflates us. I’m really getting tired of the buildup and letdown.”
Life: One thing that the state could easily do, and it wouldn’t cost them any more money, is to take all the money that the four-year schools spend on remedial education and just say, “You aren’t going to do this anymore.” That money could go to the community colleges.

Mr. Blanton: We’re geared for it because we have to do it for some of our technical programs and college transfer programs. I think something around 30% of our total enrollment take some remedial work, and in some of the particular programs you’d have greater than 30%. Eight million dollars will go a long way in giving us a few more dollars. So I see that coming. I think taxpayers are going to demand better utilization of their tax dollars over the years rather than every time the general assembly or the U.S. government talks about raising taxes. I think somewhere along, they’re going to have to stop and say, “Well, now, we can get better out of the taxes if we do this.” So I think we’re going to see better utilization of our taxes. We can’t stand taxes going up along with the price of food and everything else. We just can’t do it.

Life: One thing I would like to point out to you—and I think this is unanimous of everybody I’ve talked to—is that you can be very proud of some of the things that haven’t happened here that have happened other places. I think that’s because of your relationship with the community. Perhaps, you foresaw the possibilities of things, like what happened at Cape Fear and a few other places. I think you deserve credit for avoiding problems before they happen.

Mr. Blanton: Well, I don’t know if I should, but I think the good people who work here should. I do think we have a good rapport with our community, a good relationship. We had a meeting just two or three weeks ago with some of our foundation board members, and several of our leading citizens mentioned that Beaufort County Community College is the best thing that has ever happened to this county. We have a lot of people who feel that way. Having had a little hand in it, I’m very proud of that. But it isn’t Jim Blanton that has done it; it’s the good people I’ve had here to do it.

Life: Right.

Mr. Blanton: I firmly believe that.

Life: I was talking to somebody about the job of the president, and I said that a lot of the job of the president is just making sure some things don’t happen.

Mr. Blanton: Yes, that’s equally important, if not more so. Yes, you’re right.

Life: What’s going to happen after you retire?

Mr. Blanton: Oh, it’ll probably be the best thing that ever happened! [Much laughter.] We’ll probably have some sharp person come here and really make it a good school.

I see growth, and I hope there’s not a lot of anxiety about the change in the president because that’s never good for a campus, everyone on edge and so forth. There will be some changes, but I just think we have the quality sufficient enough now that a new president coming in will make changes slowly and not a wholesale overhaul job.

Life: Some of these changes are going to be beyond anybody’s control. The college transfer and the remedial program are going to grow whether anybody wants it to or not.

Mr. Blanton: That’s right.
Mr. Blanton reflects on his years at BCCC.

*Life:* Do you see the community changing, such as industry moving in, that would also increase the enrollment out here that would be additions to programs or not?

*Mr. Blanton:* Well, I don’t see a lot of major industries moving in. However, if and when we get Highway 17 four-laned, that will do much for the economy of the area in helping new industry to come back this way. We now have 264 pretty much four-laned. When I-95 came through Wilson, industry just mushroomed along I-95, and very few [industries] have come east [of I-95]. So we will not see much growth in industry until we get our four-laned highways in the shape they should be. Then, I think we’ll see some change.

*Life:* Do you think this is a favorable time for a change in administration at the college?

*Mr. Blanton:* I think now is a good time to make the transition. We have a good Board of Trustees and a very supportive Board of Trustees. We have unity within our board. Now, that doesn’t mean that they can’t disagree with some things sometime, but as a whole we have total support of the college from our board. And as far as I know, we don’t have a lot of morale problems on campus. I think we’ve always had somewhat of a family atmosphere here. I hope it’s been that way. I’ve tried for it to be that way. And, sure, I think now is a good time for a transition, while everything seems to be

*Darleen and Crystal, moved by respect, listen to Mr. Blanton’s reflections.*
running pretty smoothly. A college has less trauma in a change if things are running smoothly than it does if you have a board that’s half and half or if you have serious morale problems. And so I think it’s a good time for a transition.

**Life:** Is there anything that you would have done differently?

**Mr. Blanton:** Oh yes! But you don’t have time! Ha, ha, ha! Yes, I’m sure there are some things I would have done differently.

**Life:** Give us just one example.

**Mr. Blanton:** If I had it to go over, I think maybe we should have spent a little more time in the planning of the layout of our 67-acre campus. Back when we first built this [administrative] building, very few in the county ever dreamed that we’d be as large as we are now. And if I could have just had the vision to foresee our being the size we are, I think it would have made a little bit of difference in the layout, with more convenience for our students.

**Life:** What about sports? Would you like to have seen, maybe, a gymnasium for basketball?

**Mr. Blanton:** Yes. I would like to have gotten into sports.

**Life:** Do you see that happening here?

**Mr. Blanton:** Yes, I see that. Now, in the past year, the architect and the trustees and I have looked at a new master plan for the campus. And we envision an athletic complex here on campus. This, I think, will enhance our college transfer program because we will need to have different types of courses during the two years. Yes, down the road I think we will certainly have a basketball team.

**Life:** I think we have a lot of talent in this area for baseball and basketball.

**Mr. Blanton:** We do. Baseball and basketball, I can easily see those coming. And I think we’ve about reached a stage now that if I were going to be here two or three more years, I think we would have funds enough to go ahead and get things started. But we need a gym.

**Life:** Crystal had an interesting question. When is your resignation final? What day?

**Mr. Blanton:** June 30.

**Life:** The day when you walk out of this college...

**Mr. Blanton:** I’m going to cry. Ha!

**Life:** What do you feel will go through your mind then about this college?

**Mr. Blanton:** I’ll be sad, truly. I’m looking forward to retirement, but I’ll be sad because when I leave, I’ll be leaving a really large portion of my life. I feel that I’ve put a lot of time and effort and energies into what I’ve been doing here. I’ll be sad simply because I’ll be leaving colleagues that I’ve enjoyed the association with. I’ll be sad in the fact that I know that my ideas or dreams will be over as far as what I can help the college accomplish. Flipping the coin over, I’ll go away with some satisfaction because I do think we’ve made some progress, but as I said to Dr. Armstrong earlier, I don’t think Jim Blanton has done it so much as the good people that have worked here have done it. I think we’ve made progress, so I’ll be proud and happy to the extent that I can do something maybe then that I’ve never had time to.

**Life:** What do you plan to do?
Mr. Blanton: Well, I’m going to travel a little. I really like to travel. Hopefully in the month of July, I can take my entire family on about a seven-to-ten-day cruise. And when we get back, then I would like for my wife and me to hit the road. Hopefully this fall, we will be able to fly to Seattle, maybe go back over to Vancouver, B.C., which we enjoy, rent us a car, and drive down the Oregon coast.

Life: Have you been out there before?

Mr. Blanton: I’ve been to Seattle, I’ve been to Vancouver, but I haven’t been along the Oregon coast. I understand it’s quite beautiful. So we hope to go along the Oregon Coast and then spend a little time in San Francisco, maybe go into Napa Valley. We enjoy San Diego, so we’ll probably go on down to San Diego, then come home and rest awhile before we get started again.

Life: Are you going to remain active with the college, or are you going to just drop everything?

Mr. Blanton: If somebody calls me and asks me something, I’ll be glad to give them my two cents worth, but, no, I won’t be bugging anyone here who’s trying to run the school.

Life: What advice would you give to your successor?

Mr. Blanton: I’ve got to be very careful on advice I’m giving. I would like for the person—he or she—to move slowly in trying to totally reorganize the college, not that my organization has been the best, but, like I said earlier, we’ve got a lot of good people here, and the new person coming in needs to see things in operation at least long enough to make the decision whether he or she feels [the operation of the college is] of the quality he or she wants. But I don’t want someone coming in and messing with my good people.

Life: When you came into administration, were you surprised? Was it like you thought it would be, or was it completely different?

Mr. Blanton: I miss teaching. I miss the teaching because that was really a love I had. Yes, it’s been different from what I thought. You know, we look across the fence, and it looks a little greener. Even our division chairpersons here have found administration a little different from what they had thought at one time.

Life: Is there a motto that you sort of govern your life by?

Mr. Blanton: Not a model to the extent that I patterned it after someone, not a model to the extent that I’ve seen it written down or anything, but I guess we all develop our own. I have always tried to be honest in my dealings with people. I have insisted upon fairness. I don’t want any of the administrators here to treat someone less fairly than another, so equality or fairness, honesty—these are my models. I’m a church-going man. I try to live as good a life as I know how to live. My style of administration has been a little different from those of some of my fellow colleagues in the community college system. Some are very strong bureaucratic people, very strong dictatorial people. I’ve always wanted the type of organization that has more of our folks participating in what we do here and not Jim Blanton calling all of the shots. Because I don’t know all of the answers. I know there have been times that people have thought that maybe I thought I did, but I don’t! Ha! I’m sure there have been times that they’ve accused me of it, but I don’t know all the answers. That’s about all I know about the model.

Life: Why don’t we go outside. We can get some pictures of you and the students.
Mr. Blanton: I’m embarrassed for you to see this stuff on my desk.

Life: That shows you’re working hard!

Mr. Blanton: They’ll think I’m already packing! Ha! Ha!
Conclusion

By Crystal Spencer

Mr. Blanton wasn’t at all what I expected him to be. I expected the president to be a formal, somewhat aloof man. However, Mr. Blanton was down-to-earth, friendly, just one of the folks. He shows a great concern for others: his wife Betty, his two children, Carlotta and Tony, and his two grandchildren.

Also, he evinced a concern for and understanding of the needs of the students over the years, particularly the older, “nontraditional” students, most of whom work full time. Mr. Blanton refuses to accept most of the credit for the massive advancements made in the college—in construction, in enrollment, and in improved excellence of programs—saying that most of the credit should go to his “top notch” faculty.

However, I think that his humbleness belies his own spectacular contribution to the college, which has made the “Blanton Years” the great era of Beaufort County Community College. He can retire knowing that he has carried out his mission superbly. All the BCCC family—as he calls the population of the school, past and present—will miss him.