

Life's journey twists through St. Andrews for rural advocate

The journey to find one's mission in life is often filled with unforeseen twists and turns. While the journey to his position as co-founder and executive director of the Center for Community Action had its twists, the central mission for Rev. Mac Legerton's life has been the same since his youth: correct the imbalances and inequalities of life.

"Even as a child I was very concerned about the imbalance I felt and saw in the community where I lived," said Legerton '73. "I began to ask very deep questions very early on. I went to church often because my dad was a Presbyterian pastor. I would see the cross and hear the message of service there and go into the community and see the segregation and poverty there. They didn't seem in sync with each other. Even in childhood I felt the draw to do something in my life to bring the Kingdom of God, make manifest the Kingdom of God more deeply where I lived."

Knowing only the church as a vehicle for social change, Legerton entered Presbyterian College in South Carolina in 1969 intent on becoming a minister. Active in both campus and community life, Legerton studied overseas for a semester and spent a semester at a church in Boston.

"After three years I was ready to leave Presbyterian because of my interest in learning at a level that I perceived was not an opportunity there," he said. "I applied to seminary a year early and was accepted, but then I started looking into spending my last year at an undergraduate institution. I looked at St. Andrews and Florida Presbyterian (now Eckerd). I visited the St. Andrews campus and decided to spend my senior year at St. Andrews. I was very involved in the campus. I served as a photographer on the campus and served on the search committee for a college chaplain."

Serving on that search committee proved to be a key twist in Legerton's life, as the selected Rev. George Kahn helped bring him back to North Carolina.

"When I came back to visit two years later, I went to see George," Legerton recalled. "He told me about an internship in Robeson County. The Presbytery needed someone with a multicultural background to recommend campus and community ministry opportunities. I wasn't



Mac Legerton as he appeared in the 1973 Lamp and Shield Yearbook at St. Andrews.

ready to go back into an academic setting, so I applied for the internship and was offered the position. I moved to Pembroke in August of 1975 and I've been here ever since.

"It is really because of St. Andrews and the relationships there that I am now in Robeson County," he said. "If I'd never gone back to visit people I knew, with George being one of them because of the search committee, I never would have known about the position in Robeson County."

Soon after taking the position, Legerton heard his call loud and clear.

"When I moved to the county in 1975 it didn't take long to learn the history of the county," he said. "I realized that if we could come together across racial lines, economic lines and lines of faith, progress could be made. A group of 25 joined together across those lines to start the center in 1980 to address the root causes of poverty and address the challenges to true freedom and opportu-



Mac Legerton has accepted awards for his work with rural communities, including the 2007 Distinguished Service to Rural Life Award from the Rural Sociological Society in Santa Clara, Calif. and the 2007 Spirit of Unity Award presented by the Business Visions Program of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke's Regional Center for Economic, Community and Professional Development.

nity not just in Robeson County but in rural communities.”

The resulting Center for Community Action based in Lumberton is a multicultural, community-based nonprofit organization that specializes in grassroots empowerment and multi-sector collaboration as the foundations of social change.

“Robeson County is a microcosm of America,” he continued. “It is both naturally and culturally representative of rural life across the nation. If we could come together to create new systems of care here we could become a model for the country. Reflecting now 30 years later, I can say that we’ve been very successful. We are communicating on a national and international level.”

That success has been recognized at many levels. Legerton received the 2007 Distinguished Service to Rural Life Award from the Rural Sociological Society in Santa Clara, Calif. He also received the 2007 Spirit of Unity Award presented by the Business Visions Program of the University of North Carolina

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*Rep. Mike McIntyre
U.S. Congressman
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at Pembroke’s Regional Center for Economic, Community and Professional Development. In 2004, the Center was awarded the Defenders of Justice Award in the area of Grassroots Empowerment by the North Carolina Justice Center because of its work in rural job loss and recovery.

“The direction of C.C.A. has changed and programs shifted based on needs from gaps in programs and services,” Legerton said. “For example, just when we accomplished major changes in local governance and achieved equitable distribution among the three major races on our county commissioners, school board and local state representatives, the legs of the table were cut – the economy. One of the tragedies of history is that just as we get everyone to the table the legs are cut out by federal trade policies impacting the economy.”

Gaining attention and influencing policy are challenges, even for someone who coordinated model research on the impact of rural job loss and testified at state legislative and national Congressional hearings on job loss and recovery. Legerton led two major summits on “Sustaining Rural America” and is a strong advocate for the development of locally integrated, sustainable economies and just social systems in rural communities across the nation. He is a frequent lecturer on university and college campuses and coordinates service learning, alternative break and internship programs with over 100 university students from across the U.S.

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for rural America knows no bounds,” said U.S. Representative for North Carolina’s Seventh District Mike McIntyre. “He has spent his life bringing people together, searching for solutions, and offering concrete proposals to make life better for rural Americans. No one is more qualified, more sincere, and more dedicated to rural America than Mac Legerton.”

An ordained minister in the Southern Conference of the United Church of Christ, Legerton serves as President of the Downtown Lumberton Association, member of the Board of Directors of the Robeson County Partnership for Children, and Chairperson of the Welfare Reform Committee of the Robeson County Department of Social Services. He co-facilitates three regional initiatives on rural entrepreneurship, local food systems, and transforming rural philanthropy. He is a partner in the work of place-based education and rural school reform with the North Carolina Justice Center and the national Rural School and Community Trust. Legerton is a rural coordinator of the Transforming Philanthropy Project of the National Community Development Institute.

“Many people in these rural and urban areas are experiencing a deep sense of abandonment by government and society,” Legerton said. “The only way they can cancel that feeling is to become engaged. We need to come together and act on our own values on social systems and justice.

“I really see our spiritual lives both as a deeply inner journey and a broader outer journey,” he adds. “I have made a significant commitment to both my own individual, ongoing transformation and the expression of love and transformation of society as well. I feel that it is in the best interest of all to find balance. We all too often focus either inwardly or outwardly and don’t face the challenges in our lives.”

Former classmates hope to provide opportunities to current students

Rev. Mac Legerton ’73 got to know Dean of Students Marti Newbold ’76 during his year at St. Andrews.

“Although I was a senior, since I was only at St. Andrews for one year, I really got to know a lot of the freshmen,” he said. “Marti was one of those freshmen.”

The pair is working on ways to allow St. Andrews students to take advantage of the opportunities for service provided by the Center for Community Action.

“We offer fall and spring break alternative trip experiences,” Legerton said. “There are lots of options for the Center to work with St. Andrews students. Part of my sense of giving to college students is that so many of my elders helped me and provided me with opportunities and opened doors for me. I feel obligated to do this in their honor for students.”

Legerton is especially excited about the opportunities that will open up with the newest C.C.A. institute.

“There is a new institute we will launch in January 2009 on sustainable development and social justice that will include a myriad of programs,” he said. “We will have semester-long programs for students not only from North Carolina and the United States but international students as well. The program focuses on both individual and social transformation.

“I’m already networking in North Carolina as a base for undergraduate and graduate students,” Legerton added. “The potential for St. Andrews, the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, UNC-Wilmington, Campbell University and Methodist College is that the students wouldn’t have to move as they are already in the area. We will have spring, summer and fall semesters for students. We will be using interns as well as providing opportunities for academic credit.”

Do you know a member of the St. Andrews family who would make an interesting story in the next Alumni and Friends Magazine?

Let us know!

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