He's casual; he's relaxed

J.W.

is a 'friend' to SGA, the debate team

By Darrell Clem

On a late-summer afternoon last month, J.W. Patterson relaxed in a corner chair at Charlie Brown's, a cocktail lounge located in the heart of Chevy Chase—a locally well-known neighborhood near the University of Kentucky. At 5 p.m., only a handful of patrons gathered around the main bar, a few feet away, talking in hushed conversations.

The atmosphere matched Patterson's personal style—not one of formality as students sometimes expect from university professors. As Patterson ordered a bourbon and water from an approaching waitress, someone opened the front door, letting bright rays of sunlight partially fill the semi-darkness inside. One feels comfortable talking with Patterson, who shuns the authoritarian role played by many professors.

Instead, the relationships between Patterson and students who know him well are more like two-way streets. Ask anyone on the UK debate team about him and the response will be similar to those given by Student Government Association officers: “He’s a good friend.” As the waitress returned with his drink, Patterson leaned further back into the chair and began talking about his various roles at UK, often closing his eyes as if he were scanning the 24 years since he came here.

“I’m in a teaching capacity, but I’m also in a student capacity— I learn a lot from the SGA people and my debaters,” he said, “I see it more as a partnership.”

Patterson’s first involvement with student government began in 1965, when he became special assistant to former UK President Jack Oswald. The university worked closely with Lt. Gov. Steve Beshear, who was then SGA president, in planning and executing UK’s 1965 centennial celebration. Afterward, Patterson continued working with SGA on an informal basis until new governing regulations in the late 1960s required student organizations to have faculty advisors. His advisory position then became official.

Twenty-one years later, Patterson’s loyalty to SGA has not diminished. When SGA President Tim Freudenberg talked about Patterson, his serious tone was intermittently disrupted by laughter—the kind of laughter that comes from thinking about the antics of a cherished friend.

“J.W. — Dr. Patterson — has one of the most awesome record collections you’ve ever seen,” Freudenberg said. “Everything from Chuck Berry to Culture Club, from Waylon Jennings to the Clash and the Cars. It’s amazing.”

Many of the songs on those albums carry memories of former student government officers as Patterson has known. “You can ask him who was chairman of the students senate 15 years ago, and he probably not only remembers them, but probably knows what they’re doing now,” Freudenberg said. “When he talks about previous officers that he’s worked with, he’ll bring up the ones he feels he didn’t become friends with, and that really hurts him — he feels like something went wrong.” Patterson plans to stir up the memories with a reunion next June of all past student government presidents since Beshear.

Freudenberg emphasized how Patterson often goes out of his way to help friends. “One time I had to go home last spring to sign a bank loan that I was getting to fix my car,” he said. “Dr. Patterson drove me 90 miles home in the middle of the day, because I couldn’t drive my car then. He waited while I talked

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J.W. Patterson, Student Government Association adviser, discussed politics with SGA president Tim Freudenberg and SGA vice president John Cain.

In addition, Patterson makes sure that each debate trip is unique. For beginners, he records a tape of songs from his hundreds of albums, and each tape is named after the university that hosts the tournament. One song — "On The Road Again" — begins each tape.

"Let us pick a song to put on the tape, and I've never nominated a song that he didn't have on record," Mankins said.

At the end of the debate season, the debaters each name five songs for "Song of the Year." Patterson only gets to hear at least three times by more than two people. "There are all these rules," she said.

After she stopped laughing, Mankins added: "So we vote and have this final party where he plays how the vote came out. We have a plaque up in the office of the songs of the year."

"Last year it was "Back On The Chain Gang" (by The Pretenders)," Papka said. As her laughter faded into a smile, she said: "It's real good for a good person. Sometimes he's a little difficult to work with, and I think almost any of the debaters would tell you that's not true, but sometimes you just get from him the impression that you don't do anything for nothing... We're around him all the time."

Mankins said: "I guess if I only saw him two hours a week, I'd never see him in a bad frame of mind, but there's the simple fact that I see him for about 20 hours a week. If we have a disagreement, we feel very free to say, you know, you're out of it."

Patterson agreed: "I'd like to think that we feel free to register our disagreement and try to iron them out in the best way possible."

Same goal, I think not much is going to be accomplished.

"If I'm critical of a debater, I'd like to think they don't take it as a personal attack, but they take it as an organization. This is what we think we need to do to be a better debater."

In December, for example, former UK debaters now living all across the nation will meet at Patterson's Christmas party. They're all coming back," Mankins said.

Papka added: "We're not invited — we're not alumni yet."

"It's always something that we look forward to seeing people who have been on the team," Mankins said. "One of them just got married in Versailles, France."

Since debaters travel so extensively, many of their best friends live on campuses far away. "It's kind of strange, you know more people from other campuses than you do here sometimes," Mankins said.

Papka said: "We see them almost every weekend."

Debaters also socialize with student government officers because Patterson is involved in both organizations. The two groups often party at Patterson's apartment, one of which is called "Hendrix Memorial Day." Papka said, "because he is such a fan of Hendrix."

Of his role as debate director, Patterson said that before 1971 "I had not planned to become involved in activities, or having an interest in it."

Urged on by debaters who needed a coach, he accepted.

"It's the personal contact and seeing the personal growth and development of the people," Patterson said, when asked which he liked most about his work. "I see that as such an important contribution to the education of the people that I deal with."

Those students who know Patterson only in the classroom expect a more structured role from him. "I partner relationship as you can make it," he said. "When you only see a student in class, it's hard for them to accept it on that level."

J.W.

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Sometimes they're not used to that kind of working relationship.”

Patterson said that although he attempts to keep abreast of departmental affairs in the College of Communications, in which he teaches, “I would have to admit that my activities with debate restrict me from attending as many of the seminars, guest speakers, lectures, this kind of thing. But I'm certainly very interested in the department - I feel very good about it.”

Patterson's first “regularly assigned college job” was at UK in 1960, after he taught for one year at the University of Arizona to replace a faculty member who had taken a leave of absence. He was born in Stillwell, a small Oklahoma town located just west of the Arkansas-Oklahoma border. He received his master's degree in speech from the University of Michigan and later completed his doctorate in speech communication at the University of Oklahoma.

Patterson's mother currently lives in Tulsa, and his father died last December. A disagreement between them at Patterson's birth led to the name J.W. One preferred Jackson Wallace, while the other wanted to name him Jason William: The one agreement, and the final compromise, was the adoption of the first initial in each name - J.W. “It's something I would never do to a kid,” Patterson said.

Patterson first moved to Lexington, “we didn’t plan to stay very long. We were sort of on an Eastern trip, as we called it. We'd always lived in the Southwest.” Patterson wanted to teach in different areas of the country, including New England, before returning to the Southwest.

The “we” in those early day plans refers to Patterson and his ex-wife, Virginia Leigh, who has since remarried. They were married for 20 years and have been divorced about 10 years. “That chapter, I'd say, is closed, with the exception that we both have mutual interest in our daughter, Elizabeth.” She now attends high school at Miss Porter's, in Farmington, Conn., while Patterson’s ex-wife resides in Lexington.

Patterson's accomplishments include actively participating in Omicron Delta Kappa, a leadership honorary, as a faculty member for a number of years, co-founding the pre-law honorary Societas Pro Legibus, and co-writing “Contemporary Debate” with David Zarefsky, a friend from Northwestern University. Patterson currently is embarking on a second book, this time about advanced studies in argumentation.

As for the future, “I have no specific plans for change,” Patterson said. In the past, he has received some very attractive enticing offers - including positions at the universities of Texas, Minnesota and Virginia - “but for one reason or another (I didn't want to leave the University of Kentucky. I like the community.”

Just before Patterson left Charlie Brown's, he once again touched on the issue of faculty-student relationships. "If I can make a contribution toward helping someone learn to do something for themselves, it's quite thrilling. That provides me with a great deal of satisfaction.

the relationship between faculty and student is artificial, but it shouldn't be — as long as there's mutual respect and one respects the role of the other.”

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