

## Professor Edward LaMonte: Teaching BSC students to be politically responsible, globally minded

BY PAT COLE



LaMonte

Though Dr. Edward LaMonte considers his role as Howell Heflin Professor of Political Science at Birmingham-Southern to be the most rewarding, his interests and influence reach far beyond his lectures about the theory and practice of politics. And he has taken on many roles over the years to prove it.

This gifted teacher, administrator, scholar, advocate, and mentor also directs the college's Office of International Programs (OIP) and maintains active partnerships with several community-based organizations. But perhaps the most stellar characteristic of LaMonte that is

often pointed out is the sincerity he exhibits toward the needs of people and his desire to make a difference.

"One of the gifts I have definitely tried to develop over the years is to take other people very seriously, especially my students, and to convey a sense of real interest in and respect for them," says LaMonte. "I try to make my teaching as much a personal experience for my students as an academic one. I really enjoy talking to people and learning more about them."

Along with balancing his part-time work with the OIP and teaching undergraduate students about the world of public affairs, LaMonte is

an instructor in the college's Master of Arts in Public and Private Management Program. He also serves as the coordinator of BSC's international studies major.

"Very important to my work as OIP director is the presence of Anne Ledvina [associate OIP director], who is a passionate and dedicated international educator," says LaMonte. "My primary role is to work with Anne and the college administration to develop policies for study abroad that are appropriate for Birmingham-Southern and for the world in which we send our students to study."

Since starting his work with OIP in 2000, LaMonte has been constant in his push to move Birmingham-Southern forward in keeping with its international focus. His contributions include helping to develop grants for international study, conducting site visits to universities overseas to establish partnerships, and serving as an advocate for the Study-Abroad program to faculty colleagues. "I think it is important to prepare young people not only to live and function economically in the world, but also to prepare them to become citizens of the world in a way that I certainly wasn't at that age and that most people of my generation were less inclined to be," he remarks.

LaMonte grew up in Columbus, Ohio, in what he calls "a very non-political family," and says his parents placed a high priority instead on educating him and his

two older brothers. He studied history at Harvard and earned a master's degree and Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago.

"My first introduction to Birmingham and the civil rights movement occurred through a service-learning project at Harvard in 1964," he explains. "That summer, Harvard teamed up with an organization at Miles College, and we lived and worked together on their campus. I became acutely aware of how limited my own background and experiences were and how important it is for people as they grow to be around others who are different from themselves in significant ways."

Between getting his graduate degrees and joining BSC, LaMonte directed UAB's Center for Urban Studies through its first decade, and later served eight years as a senior staff member for Birmingham's first African-American mayor, Dr. Richard Arrington Jr. "The opportunity to work with Mayor Arrington during two of his terms at the same time that Birmingham was undergoing profound economic, social, and political change was a remarkable personal and professional experience for me," he expresses. "It was during that time that I began my international travel as a representative for the city."

These types of cross-cultural experiences are what guided LaMonte to many of his off-campus pursuits in urban development and his efforts to bring people together from diverse backgrounds. His leadership over the years in local business, social, educational, and civic organizations is impressive and too numerous to list completely, but includes the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, Operation New Birmingham, Alabama Symphonic Association, Partners in Neighbor-

hood Growth, and A+ Education Foundation.

Last year, LaMonte joined the Alabama Council for Excellence in Education, to which he brings a personal perspective from his experience in 1996 as interim superintendent of schools for the Birmingham Board of Education. "I realized that the city of Birmingham is basically an all-black school system and that there are others in its surrounding areas who are overwhelmingly white," he notes. "While we are much further down the road than we were decades ago in terms of diversity, still so many of us live separate lives from people who are fundamentally different from us. We need to explore common ground, rather than division."

While serving as superintendent, LaMonte took a half-year leave of absence from his administrative duties at BSC, but maintained his teaching load. "That still proved to be a real problem," he recalls. "One cannot be an adequate school superintendent and have a competing claim like that. I learned that lesson from hard and painful experiences."

Following those tough months, he returned to teaching full-time and became dean of the former Adult Studies Program at BSC, a position in which LaMonte says he was delighted to serve. "I was very attracted to the quality and impact of that program," he says. "I think it made a tremendous difference for many adults in the Birmingham metropolitan area."

Both in the city and the state, LaMonte has received many academic and civic honors during his career for his contributions, published articles for newspapers and journals, and has worked as a consultant to several local groups. He is a past recipient of the college's ODK Excellence in Teaching Award and garnered the 2004 Brotherhood

and Sisterhood Award from the National Conference for Community and Justice.

A great support to LaMonte's professional career is his wife, Ruth, an Episcopal priest and chair of Birmingham's Sister City Commission. "My wife has a strong international background and experience from both her former and current work," he says. "I travel with her as often as I can to assist in her work of developing relationships with cities around the world."

Since he has traveled somewhat extensively overseas and worked in the world of politics and public affairs, LaMonte believes he brings a unique strength to his students. "Traveling and working in city government has added sensitivity to my teaching, and I try to draw on it in appropriate ways and incorporate that regularly into the classroom."

LaMonte readily admits that his desire to teach at a small liberal arts college has always been stronger than any of his thoughts toward becoming a career civil servant. "It is a real privilege to be a part of the educational community at Birmingham-Southern where the lives and well-being of its undergraduates are the primary focus, yet where there is a deep respect for the responsibilities and opportunities connected with the community—both in the immediate neighborhood and the world at large."



## Longtime religion professor Wells to retire after 40 years



Wells

When Dr. Roy Wells, Birmingham-Southern professor of religion, retires at the end of May, he also will be celebrating his 50th anniversary as a graduate of the college.

Wells grew up in Birmingham and knew that after graduation from high school he wanted to study ministry at Birmingham-Southern. But, he had no idea where the school was located. A short bus ride later, he found himself in Munger Hall and knew he'd come to the right place. In the hallway, he met the legendary English Professor Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams. Wells said to himself, "Now that's a college professor!"

He graduated Phi Beta Kappa in

1957 with a major in classical Greek. He continued his education at the Vanderbilt University Divinity School, where he earned a bachelor's degree in Biblical studies in 1960 and a Ph.D. on completion of a dissertation in Old Testament in 1969. At Vanderbilt, Wells was recipient of the Founder's Medal, the Divinity School's highest academic recognition, and the Owen Prize in Biblical Studies.

Wells has a formidable reputation for scholarship, with his primary research area being the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. He has presented papers and written articles and reviews and has traveled in Israel and Jordan on research grants. As a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, he has been invited to participate in a consultation on the formation of the Book of Jeremiah and is on the steering committee for a research seminar on the formation of the book of Isaiah.

Wells was a minister in the North Alabama Conference of the United Methodist Church for many years and conducted services and offered seminars and workshops for clergy and lay people. In 1996, he was confirmed in the Episcopal Church and was ordained a priest in 2000. He serves as priest associate at St. Andrew's Parish in Birmingham and as a Diocesan supply priest for area Episcopal churches.

But his first ministry, Wells says, has been teaching. In his more than four decades of engaging students in divinity studies, he says that his

favorite part has been "the discovery of watching people realize how good they really are"—how capable as scholars, how filled with promise. "I enjoy watching students become colleagues," he says. A number of his students have gone on to fill distinguished roles in academia.

His teaching positions have included fellowships at Vanderbilt Divinity School and Vanderbilt University and instructor positions at St. Luke's Seminary at Sewanee and Austin College in Sherman, Texas. He joined the BSC religion faculty in 1967.

Wells is quick to acknowledge the importance throughout his career of his wife, Laura Stephenson Wells '59. High-school sweethearts, the two recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. Together they have raised three children and now enjoy a grandchild.

Wells also cites the importance of fellow faculty during his long career at BSC, a faculty, he says, that is distinguished by its ongoing quality and substance. "My colleagues have kept me alive," he says, "stimulated, energized." Close colleagues return the compliment. Dr. Earl F. Gossett Jr. '54, BSC Canterbury Professor Emeritus of Religion and Philosophy, says "Roy is a brilliant Biblical scholar ... his students have benefited from his challenging and careful scholarship and teaching. My own theological understanding has been enhanced by dialogue with him."



Gibbs

## Gibbs to retire after 37 years at Birmingham-Southern

When Professor of Music Dr. Thomas Gibbs retires from Birmingham-Southern at the end of May, he will leave behind a durable and tangible legacy of influence in the lives of thousands of students and colleagues.

A 1964 BSC graduate in religion and philosophy, Gibbs holds a master's degree and Ph.D. in musicology from the University of Texas. He joined the BSC faculty in 1970 and for 37 years has taught a wide variety of courses in music history and theory.

Gibbs' teaching at BSC has included conducting, choral literature, opera literature, hymnology, and theology and music. From 1980 to 1988, he served as chair of the college's former Division of Fine and Performing Arts.

As teacher, conductor, vocal coach, pianist, and organist, Gibbs' musical leadership skills have extended outside of BSC to the local community and beyond. He spent 10 years as conductor of the Birmingham Concert Chorale, an organization that serves as the Alabama Symphony Chorus. Gibbs has conducted opera and musical

theatre productions with professional organizations such as Birmingham Summerfest. He conducts the Red Mountain Chamber Orchestra each year and has served as president of the Birmingham Music Club. He also has served as organist and choir-master for several local churches.

"Principally, however, I'm a teacher," he notes. "And everything that I've done over the years has grown out of my teaching. The climate at BSC encourages and supports professional activity and community involvement."

When asked what he is most proud of, Gibbs talks about the achievements of his students, particularly those who have active careers as conductors and teachers. He also notes that it is especially satisfying when former students stay in touch, continuing the dialogue that began in class.

As far as offering general advice for current students, Gibbs says that he encourages his students to think for themselves: "to value your own engagement with the music, your own observations, and your own responses, which are just as important as what you read in books."

A native of Birmingham, Gibbs grew up in the city's musical scene. "My mother was a wonderful composer and organist, and most of our family's friends were musicians," he recalls. "My parents wanted me to go to medical school after college, but I could never disengage myself from music."

Even so, Gibbs is eager to cite some of his experiences that do not directly relate to music. He has been a faculty advisor to three BSC Interim service-learning projects—

opportunities that he says are invaluable and life-changing. Through other Interim projects, he has become a practitioner and student of Buddhist and Taoist contemplative practices, especially as presented in the curriculum for westerners called the New Forest Way.

At the end of May, Gibbs will move to Marietta, Ga., where his partner, Steven Schneider, is employed. He will work on music-editing projects, as well as complete a number of articles for professional journals.

"I've been reminding my professional colleagues in the Atlanta area that I will be available for teaching and conducting," says Gibbs. "I don't feel old enough to retire."

## Sprayberry recognized as exemplary teacher by United Methodist Church

Dr. Sandra Sprayberry, the Robert E. Luckie Professor of English at Birmingham-Southern, has been presented with an Exemplary Teaching Award by the Board of Higher Education and Campus Ministry of the United Methodist Church.



Sprayberry

The award is presented annually to a BSC professor who is "characterized by excellence in teaching; civility and concern for students and colleagues; commitment to value-centered education; and service to students, the institution, the community, or the church."

Having joined the BSC faculty in 1988, Sprayberry holds a bachelor's degree in English and a master of fine arts from the University of Alabama and a Ph.D. in 20th-century poetry from Florida State University.