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From Cornfield to Classroom:

USF St. Petersburg Professor Reaps Rewarding Harvest

June 20, 2003 (St. Petersburg, Fla.) - From the meager existence of a southern Illinois sharecropper’s life to a respected scholar and professor at USF St. Petersburg’s College of Business – Dr. James L. Strachan credits the American educational system for all his accomplishments.

“In some ways I reflect the American ideal in that I grew up the son of share crop farmers in Illinois with one parent having finished fourth grade and the other only eighth,” reflects Strachan. “After my father died when I was 12, we moved to a small town of 350 people where my mother raised me and an older sister on $69 per month.”

He attributes his background for his “great respect for the American educational system” which, in his view, is “one of the greatest concepts in the world that has ever been developed.” Strachan goes on to say, “It is a concept that enables an individual who is willing to put forth the effort to move from any starting point to an ending point, becoming a professional in the process. What an amazing opportunity for each and every individual.”

After receiving both his bachelor’s degree and his master’s in finance and accounting from Southern Illinois University, Strachan left Illinois and received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. He held positions including assistant dean of the undergraduate management program, professor of finance and senior lecturer in accountancy during his more than 20-years with the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. He also served as vice president and general manager of First Data Services, acting director of finance for the Center for Human Services, and president of Discovery Musical Productions, Inc.

“Dr. Strachan brings his real-world experience to his classroom,” said Gary Olson, interim associate vice president for Academic Affairs. “His students will benefit from his expertise and knowledge of the complexities and nuances of the corporate world’s finance and accounting issues as well as his proven ability in mentorship.

The recipient of many faculty-of-the-year and outstanding-teacher awards, Strachan is also a well-published writer and respected researcher. However, it is not his scholarly accomplishments that he cherishes most or that endear him to his students. “My first job at the university level,” said Strachan, “ended up being the one I stayed with for 24 years. The reason, in retrospect, was that it combined the two things that were truly ‘me’ and what I was all about. First, I taught. Secondly, I worked with students in their personal and professional development as their advisor. As I worked with these students, I developed two distinct philosophies for which I would best like to be remembered by my students.

“They are, ‘You are too young to make a major mistake.’ Therefore, be who you are and do what your heart and your instincts are telling you to do. Secondly, whenever a student would thank me for a class they had taken, for advice I had given, for helping them solve a problem they shared with me, or when I was recognized for one of my teaching awards my response was always a heartfelt ‘You are worth it.’”

Strachan’s philosophy has served him well throughout his career. Beginning this fall, USF St. Petersburg’s finance and accounting students will be the benefactors of his simple, yet powerful credo. While it is our educational system Strachan credits for turning a farm boy into a professor, it is Strachan’s tutelage and mentorship that former students credit with their successes.