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Tom Scott: Our Teacher of the Year

To say Tom Scott has been a fixture at Kennesaw State College for more than 26 years is both a truism and a gross oversimplification of what Tom means to the school. For most, Kennesaw State would be unthinkable without this his-

tory professor with quiet, gentlemanly ways. For many, Tom embodies all that makes Kennesaw State a special place to teach and learn.

This special role in our school has earned Tom the admiration of faculty and students. And last

spring, he was further honored when he was named Kennesaw State's Teacher of the Year. In an interview conducted shortly after he was selected, Tom talked about teaching at Kennesaw State.



Q: How did you get into teaching?

A: I didn't start out when I was in college to be a teacher. I really didn't know what I was doing when I went to college but everybody thought I was halfway intelligent so I was a pre-med student as an undergraduate and majored in zoology. But it gradually sunk in to me that medicine or science just wasn't my cup of tea.

At any rate it became obvious to me when I realized that what I really liked was history. What really got me into teaching to begin with was not love of teaching. I didn't know whether I could teach or not. I never took an education course, which I think was a mistake. I wish I had, but I never did.

So it was the discipline that attracted me. I've just always loved history. It is my way of or-

ganizing information that makes life meaningful to me.

Q: You say that teaching seemed a frightening proposition to you. What was frightening about teaching?

A: I think just the fact that I hadn't ever done it before and didn't know whether I could do it. It's kind of frightening to spend years preparing for something, and you might just be a total failure and get fired from your first job. Yeah, I think the first year of teaching is far and away the worst possible experience that anybody can have.

J.B. Tate used to say when we were young faculty here that he felt when he started his career that he should have given them the money back from his first year of teaching. I know J.B. shouldn't have given the money back and I know he had to al-

ways be a great teacher, but that's the way we felt at that time, that somehow or other we were cheating the taxpayers by taking the money.

Q: Were you looking at people who were teaching and saying "I could never do that?"

A: No, I don't think I ever said that. I mean I didn't know whether I had anything to say that anybody would find interesting or not. And I was like a lot of people. Public speaking was frightening to me. And I think what happens when you start teaching, you find out what works and what doesn't work.

If you've got any sense at all you quickly drop those things that don't work. You just develop an expectation that students are going to like my class so it's OK to go into the classroom; it's nothing to get fright-

ened about, but until you do it the first year you don't know whether you can or not.

Q: Are there things that make teaching history more challenging than other disciplines?

A: One of our great problems in teaching history is that we see it all the time. The source of students' unhappiness is that they don't think it has any relevance to anything that matters to them. They think it's a bunch of facts and dates that have been crammed down their throats.

They think history is knowing that Columbus came to America in 1492 and that for some reason or other it's important to know that the Civil War began in 1861. They don't have a clue, the vast majority of them, that history is really about the interpretation of those facts; that the facts are the raw materials, but the facts are not the history. History is what the historian does with those facts when he or she selects and interprets what those facts mean.

Before coming to Kennesaw, Tom taught one year at Western Piedmont Community College in North Carolina. He said he survived that first year because he didn't do anything but prepare for classes and grade papers.

Q: What was the hardest part about that first year?

A: Just staying up day-by-day. Being prepared, not to make a fool of myself in the classroom. Knowing what I was going to do

the next day and you know this was a junior college. We had a heavy teaching load, 15 hours, and I think I was teaching Western civ and American history. So I had to keep up. I knew my American history a lot better than I knew European history. Fortunately they didn't have World history back then. I don't know how I would have survived if I'd had to suddenly learn about Africa and Asia and everywhere else at that time. I just worked hard.

At the end of that year, there was one radical student in that school, a female student, 19 or 20. She was a favorite of my department chair, who was a political scientist, and he was a pretty liberal guy although he had just retired just a few years earlier from the Navy, where he had been captain.

The Dean of Students got real concerned that this girl was ruining her reputation because she was spending too much time talking to black male students at the water fountain. That's the only thing he knew about her contact with blacks. He called her into his office and threatened her with disciplinary action if she didn't stop talking to black students.

My department chair, who had all this military background, was so angry at this he just went into the office of the president one day, banged his fist on the desk and said, "I don't care what you do, just make a decision about something." So the president fired him. On the spot.

We started going to meetings all over NC to find lawyers to

defend the chair. I was still pretty conservative at that time. He didn't think I should be going to these things and he didn't want me to feel like I had to form an opinion that I didn't want to have. But at any rate, they offered me a contract; this was right at contract time. They were going to give me a 6% increase in salary, which was more than anybody else was getting. I just wrote them a letter telling them I wasn't coming back and telling them why. I didn't have a job in sight at that time.

Q: You became a campus rebel?

A: I don't know that I ever became a rebel, but it was kind of a turning point in my career. It was the first time I ever stood up for anything that meant anything where I took a huge risk on my own. I could have gotten drafted at that time. I was only 24 years old.

Without a job in sight, I resigned and started looking for jobs. I was just extremely fortunate that a guy named Dale Smith who taught history here at Kennesaw got a job in July at someplace like Northern Michigan University, and it created an opening and they had my application on file.

Dr. Beggs gave me a call. I came on. I'd been telling everybody why I left this other college and Dr. Beggs was about the first one I ever ran into that not only was interested in my story, but it was a plus to him that I had this experience. Maybe he liked to think I stood up for a department chair. Dr. Beggs was

pretty liberal; he still is liberal.

I had only one year past a master's. It wasn't very bright for somebody one year beyond a master's and with just one year's teaching experience to leave the first job that he had ever had. Dr. Beggs gave me a chance. I don't think Dr. Sturgis was very impressed. But Dr. Beggs wanted me.

Q. Has it ever crossed your mind to pursue a more lucrative career?

A: Well, I started out to be in medicine, but I came to the conclusion that I was making myself miserable trying to do something that I did not want to do.

I think one of the attractive things about teaching is that you are surrounded by people who are motivated by things other than money. I mean none of us would be in teaching if our primary motivation was to make money. We are too smart for that.

Q: When you walk into the classroom at the beginning of the quarter, what things run through your mind about this sea of unknown people out there?

A: The last couple of years I have not been teaching the survey courses. I have been teaching Georgia history and I've been teaching our methodology class. This quarter in my Georgia history class I think there were only two out of 28 who were not at least seniors and a number are graduates in the post-bac program, and so I have students who are just fan-

tastically good.

These students who have come back to college after a few years out, and I don't care what their SAT scores are, bring those life experiences into the classroom and bring high motivation into the classroom with them. They are top notch students, and I would certainly compare our non-traditional students favorably to the traditional students at Emory or anywhere else simply because of all the experiences and the fact that they want to be here and are determined to do well. So when I go into a classroom I start out by telling the students I know they have had successes in their academic careers before and there is no reason in the world you should not all make A's and B's and you should be ashamed of yourself if you don't because you have the capability to do it and it's my job to help you do what you want to do.

Q: How have you worked to make yourself a better teacher?

A: I think for me there has been a fundamental shift. I spent my early years developing as a good lecturer and my concept of lecturing was always that students interrupt at any time to ask questions or make comments so I always had discussion.

I was essentially a lecturer. It was really a big ego booster for people to be hanging on your every word out there and I just decided along the way that students just weren't retaining long enough after the quarter was over the kinds of things I wanted

them to. They just weren't getting the experience I thought they should get.

I got great evaluations all along, but I still didn't feel happy with what I was doing. I kind of reinvented myself as a teacher seven or eight years ago and decided that what we really ought to be doing in history is making primary sources the focus of the class. Everybody else does. It would be weird if somebody was teaching a class on Shakespeare and lectured all quarter along on Shakespeare but never let you read a play by Shakespeare.

History is a field where teaching has traditionally been that you never exposed the students to material on which the teacher has based all of his or her conclusions. I've decided that's just not right, that you've got to start with primary sources. I made the readings the focus and in effect I don't get that big ego charge from my eloquent sermon up there that students are enjoying so much.

I get far more discussion in class now than I used to get and I think students are getting more that's meaningful to them out of this approach. I still control the agenda by asking the question.

I think I've altered the way I teach and I'm much happier with the way I teach now.

Excerpted from an interview in June by Alan Schwartz and Rich Welch.

