Riding With Heart

Vernica Parker-Gathers takes a different spin on two wheels

Why Michael Auerbach can’t shake his déjà vu

How Bethany Wendler plans to build something great to come home to
Michael Auerbach Has All the Answers

THE COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON IS FOR LIFE. It stays with you. And, eventually, it will call you back. Michael Auerbach - who left his post as the chair of the biology department and acting director of Grice Marine Laboratory in 2000 - knows this first hand. After more than a decade at the Desert Research Institute in Reno, Nev., he’s returned to campus to serve as the dean of the School of Sciences and Mathematics. And he’s happy to be here - because, at heart, nothing compares to the College of Charleston.

Q: How did your view of the College change while you were away?
A: I left with a great feeling about the general ambiance on campus and the quality of my colleagues, and that didn’t change over time. Time and visits to numerous other institutions over the past decade have underscored what a special institution the College of Charleston is.

Q: What did you miss the most?
A: I missed the feel of being on a compact, urban, highly interactive campus.

Q: What’s it like being back?
A: Each day is a mix of surprises and déjà vu moments.

Q: What has surprised you the most?
A: The growth in the campus. From the new science building in which I have my office, to new dorms, buildings for the arts and business and new parking garages: Many facets of the physical campus have changed radically.

Q: What else has changed in the past 10 years? What has stayed the same?
A: One very obvious change is the large number of superb new faculty who have joined the College in the past decade. At the same time, there are many familiar faces among the faculty who are still excelling in the classroom and as scholars.
There’s a lot of love at the College of Charleston. Indeed, in many ways, we’re all one big, happy family. For some, however, the family ties extend beyond campus – connecting them not just through a commitment to the College, but also through marriage to one another. In fact, there are more married couples on campus than you might guess. Think you know your College of Charleston family?

Try matching these faculty and staff members with their better halves!

- Jeri Cabot & Bill Olejniczak
- Susan Farrell & Joe Kelly
- Deborah Bidwell & Gorka Sancho
- Carol Toris & Dave Battey
- Michelle Van Parys & Mark Sloan
- Bev Diamond & Ned Hettinger
- Susan Anderson Rivaleau & Kelly Shaver
- Silvia Rodriguez Sabater & Joe Kelly
- Courtney Murren & Matt Rutter
- Cathy Evans & Lee Irwin
- Darin Junck & Kelly Shaver
- Mark Sloan & Lee Irwin
- Michelle Van Parys & Joe Kelly
- Bev Diamond & Matt Rutter
- Silvia Rodriguez Sabater & Joe Kelly
- Courtney Murren & Ned Hettinger
- Cathy Evans & Dave Battey
- Susan Anderson Rivaleau & Darin Junck

It's no wonder people step aside when they see her coming: She calls herself Quick Draw, dresses in head-to-toe leather and travels with a posse of fast-moving, tough-looking characters with a reputation for trouble. But the people have it all wrong, insists Vernica Parker-Gathers, and she’s here to set the record straight.
“We get a bum rap because most people look at bikers as bad. But all bikers are not bad – we’re not bad,” says the corporal and assistant supervisor in public safety, who is also a member of and the events coordinator for the EZ Ryders Motorcycle Club, based out of Hollywood, S.C. “Being in a bike club isn’t about partying. It’s a lot more than that. We’re making a difference in our community – a positive difference.”

Besides, the EZ Ryders don’t have time to get into trouble: They’re too busy participating in fundraisers like charity rides, carwashes and block parties benefiting various community organizations and causes.

“We fit in whatever we can – raising money for scholarships, helping out at the shelters – we do it all. We don’t care what it is, we just want to get out there and help our community,” says Parker-Gathers, adding that the EZ Ryders belong to the Palmetto Urban Motorcycle Association, which was formed to give back to the community and lend a helping hand to those in need. “It’s all about respect for each other and for our community. And that’s what I like about it – I get to help make a difference. That feels so good.”

Of course, barreling down the road with the wind hammering against her body feels pretty good, too.

“It is an awesome, glory-filled feeling,” sighs Parker-Gathers. “When I go out there and just ride – get away from everything – there are no worries. It’s just me and the road. I love it. It’s a lot of fun.”

It’s also pretty empowering.

“When you’re on the bike, you’re in control. You’ve got force and speed. It’s really cool,” says Parker-Gathers, who started riding dirt bikes when she was 9, though it was 2007 before she bought her first motorcycle, a Honda CBR 600. “It was like a tricycle that you learn to ride and then outgrow in a few months. I needed more power almost immediately, and I’d moved up to a Honda CBR 1000 within a year.”

Since then, this racing bike – which she named Big Jim – has served her well, carrying her through everything from the Town of Hollywood Christmas Parade to Daytona Bike Week.

“Bike weeks are especially fun because you’re surrounded by other bikers just like you. You feel like you’re part of something bigger,” says Parker-Gathers.

“Everyone in the biking community has mutual respect for each other. When you see someone with their vest on, it’s instant acknowledgement – you give each other props. I like being part of that. It’s like a big, huge family.”

If she considers the biking community her extended family, the 12 members of the EZ Ryders should be considered her immediate family. In fact, the club is family: Her brother is the president of the club, and her father was part of it “as a young buck coming up,” too. Not only that, but her daughter and husband are involved whenever feasible.

“We are very family oriented, and try to include our families in everything we can,” says Parker-Gathers, explaining that there are jump castles and other kid-friendly activities at the monthly meetings. “It’s good old-fashioned fun for the whole family. That’s what people don’t realize – they think we’re all up to no good, when really the opposite is true.”

So, next time you see them coming, don’t let their speed or their leather scare you away. After all, when it comes to Vernica Parker-Gathers and the EZ Ryders, it’s all good.
You’ve got to start on solid ground – lay a good, strong foundation before you start putting it together, brick by brick, piece by piece. Then, with the basic framework in place, it’s time to flesh it out, make it all work both independently and together. Yes, it can be tedious, and it might test your patience, but in the end it’ll be everything you dreamed of – you just have to stick to the plans.

That’s why, when Bethany Wendler came to the College in 2004, her first order of business was drafting a plan. Not that she’s building her dream home on campus, of course; rather, she’s creating the blueprints for a stronger, more substantial homecoming for the College – and she’s moving forward accordingly, one piece at a time.

“One of the challenges I faced when I came into this position is that our homecoming is very nontraditional: We don’t have football, our homecoming is in February, and it’s very student driven instead of alumni driven,” says the assistant director of student life, who – in addition to coordinating homecoming – is responsible for overseeing student-run organizations and programming. “I knew homecoming could be so much more, and I wanted it to be a defining moment in life on campus – one of those things that students look forward to while they’re here, and look back on after they leave. So, I just started planning how to grow it into something more, evolve it.”

The foundation for homecoming was already in place, so Wendler worked to nail down consistent dates for the annual weeklong festivities, and – from there – started putting together the most critical building block of any homecoming: tradition.

“My intention was always to work in different traditions and build it out from there,” says Wendler, noting the College’s homecoming now includes royalty nominations, a pep rally, a service project, a chili cook-off, a hip-hop fashion show, a golf-cart parade, a concert and pre-game tailgating. “We’ve built these traditions, and now homecoming has a core schedule of events” (see calendar, opposite; for more, visit cofc.edu/homecoming).

Of course, giving homecoming a presence on campus takes more than just a week of events. It takes awareness, energy and school spirit. With a “spirit guard” patrolling campus to reward staff, faculty and students who show their Cougar pride, this year’s homecoming encourages campuswide participation – something Wendler plans to build on in years to come.

After all, school spirit is the most important cornerstone for homecoming.
Think you’ve got enough on your plate? Well, make room for one more thing, because it’s time to dish out your best recipes for a little bit of healthy competition. This semester’s Now You’re Cookin’ contest is officially on, so submit your recipes for spring side dishes to lutza@cofc.edu by Feb. 28. The winning recipe – to be chosen based on taste from the five healthiest recipes submitted – will be served at Fresh Food Company in May, and the winner and a friend will dine for free, compliments of ARAMARK.

For contest rules and restrictions, visit portico.cofc.edu/recipecontest.
CONGRATULATIONS TO MONEKE WATSON, campus police officer, who was the first to guess that the object in question was the top of the African American Cemetery Memorial on Rivers Green. Dedicated in Feb. 2008, the memorial commemorates and recognizes the people buried in cemeteries adjacent to the Addlestone Library from 1794 to the 1930s. If you think you know what the object in the above photo is and where it can be found, send your guess to lutza@cofc.edu by Friday, Feb. 11. The names of those who submit the correct answer will be entered into a drawing for two tickets to your choice of performances from the spring 2011 International Piano Series. The contest is open to all College faculty and staff.