

Rigs to Rhetoric

After a 20-year career driving transfer-trucks rolled away, an unexpected foray into academia proves that the best route is often found just around the bend.

By Bryan A. Oesterreich

I found a parking space on Front Street in Wilmington. I climbed out of my Mustang, dropped three quarters into the parking meter, looked around, and started walking toward Cape Fear Community College — a block away. It was a chilly September morning in 1992. I shoved my hands into my sweatshirt pockets as I walked. My palms were damp. My pace became slower. I had an appointment to take a GED exam at the college. I checked my watch. Forty-five minutes to kill — enough time for a couple of cups of coffee in the Bistro Cafe in the Cotton Exchange. I took a seat at the counter that faced the street and ordered a large cup of high-octane coffee, black, no sugar. As I sipped my coffee, a large tractor-trailer slowly rumbled by on Front Street. I wondered where he was going. The big rig looked out of place on the cobblestone street, but it brought back some memories.

A long road ahead

It was 1966, and I was sitting in Mr. Howell's math class, dragging myself through the first three months of high school. While Howell stood at the blackboard and waxed eloquent on the steps involved in finding "x," I stared out the window. I was a year older than my classmates, having been held back in the seventh grade. This year wasn't going much better, so in December, I quit. I got married a year later.

She was the first girl who had any interest in me, the first girl I ever kissed. Her parents allowed us to get married, but I needed to find suitable work. The take-home pay from the car wash wouldn't support a family. I was sitting in the kitchen when I saw an ad that read, "Earn Big Money — Drive Tractor-Trailers!" It was a five-week course. My father-in-law paid the tuition. I had never even driven a pickup. I did the course in four weeks. With a new family, fatherhood had given me what school hadn't — motivation. And motivation is what one needs when faced with taking a tractor-trailer to New York City. (Case in point: Some companies advertising for drivers put "no New York deliveries" in their ads.) But every time I thought about quitting, I'd look at my daughter riding her hobbyhorse and put those thoughts away somewhere. A year later, we had another daughter. I started taking longer hauls.

I usually didn't mind being gone for a week at a time. When I'd pull in front of the house on Fridays, my girls would run out to meet me. Our weekend would be filled with riding bikes, cooking, watching movies, going shopping, and telling them stories about where I'd been, while they sat on my lap.

Sunday was different. As my neighbors would be relaxing in their living rooms tuning in to "The Ed Sullivan Show," I'd be packing my suitcase. The hardest part of the job was

saying good-bye on Sunday evenings. I'd toss my suitcase up into the sleeper compartment, climb the steps, slip into the driver's seat, fire up the engine, and wait for air pressure to build up so I could release the brakes. My wife and daughters would wave from the front window as I slowly moved away from the house. That first hour on the road was always the longest.

Driving big trucks has some well-known shortcomings: long hours, ever-changing sleep routines, bad weather, over-aggressive highway patrolmen, rude passenger car drivers, highway construction delays, breakdowns, weighing stations, getting lost in unfamiliar cities, truck stop food, and the always present threat of having an accident. But, it also has an array of benefits — tangible and intangible.

One of the first things a driver learns is to finish what they start. There were times I had to wait for the weather to clear before leaving the house, but once I did, it got delivered. I'd put the "hammer down" to get it to its destination. Drivers make money when the wheels keep turning.

Another benefit is self-confidence. I can remember being in the left lane of I-80 in Pennsylvania one winter. It was after midnight. There were about 20 of us running together — up and down the mountains (running in groups helped us stay awake). I was in the left lane about mid-pack — drivers were running up in front and to my rear. And we usually ran nose-to-tail. The CB radio crackled to life. The driver leading us had just felt his rig wiggle as he crossed over a bridge that had probably iced up. I was steering 80,000 pounds of truck. If one of us — just one — lost his nerve, we'd all be sliding off the mountain. No one did.

And the money was decent. We managed to save up enough for a small cottage of our own. The credit cards were paid up. The girls always wore Buster Brown shoes. Twenty years of driving eventually took its toll on my body, however. In 1990, I injured my back making a delivery — a back that had taken a beating for too long. The orthopedic surgeon told me my trucking days were over. He suggested a career change.

An inspired education

In the Bistro Cafe, I checked my watch again. It was time. I finished the last of the now room-temperature coffee, left a tip, and headed out the door. Crossing the street from the Cotton Exchange, I stopped and looked up at the imposing, concrete, six-story college. I swallowed hard. I'm 42 years old, I thought — with an eighth-grade education. How can I pass a high-school exam? I paused, while a horse-drawn carriage with tourists aboard rolled by. After taking a deep breath, I crossed the street and walked in.

I found the testing room, in the basement, and took the five-hour exam. Three weeks later, the news came. I passed. Then I learned I could take college courses because of my GED. A door opened just a little — I shoved it open the rest of the way.

The first semester in college was the hardest. Most classes were filled with young students. I was routinely mistaken for the professor. “No,” I’d say, “I’m enrolled in this class.” My confidence grew with each completed course. My grades would come in the mail, and I’d post them on the refrigerator.

I knew I wanted to teach during my second semester. I can remember when that happened. It was in the spring of 1993 — in Shirley Berry’s English class at Cape Fear Community College.

Berry treated me, and my fledgling classmates, with respect. And she introduced me to a concept that I still use in my classes now — peer-editing. For those who haven’t been to college for a while, peer-editing is classmates exchanging drafts. Then, they act as editors, with proper direction. In that class, I was asked to look at others’ attempts at literary excellence and give them suggestions for revisions. That’s when something remarkable happened.

I learned how satisfying it was to help those with weaker skills than me. And I learned from those with stronger skills. In that class, I realized my calling. I’d go home feeling I made a difference. I needed more of that.

As the months rolled by, my confidence grew. I had announced my intentions to transfer to the University of North Carolina at Wilmington and earn a degree in English — with the dream of teaching at some level. In the spring of 1994, I applied at UNCW and was accepted. Although I matriculated into university life without incident, it wasn’t always easy.

Before classes began in my second semester, I was browsing through the campus bookstore for my required texts. As I fingered my way down the “Eng” aisle, my hand stopped at the proper location: English Literature. The professor was John Clifford. I picked up the text and leafed through the table of contents. Then, I stopped. Something wasn’t right. I looked at the plastic tag under the shelf — it had Clifford’s name as the instructor — then I looked at the cover of the text — it was actually written by Clifford. I had signed up for a class with someone who’d written the required text? Panic ensued, but not for long. I ended up taking five classes with John. He was a marvel at making us feel like we could really understand Foucault and Derrida. He showed us how a teacher could explain jargon-filled critical texts in a way that allowed students to glean insights into theories otherwise completely inaccessible.

Another door opens

As my undergraduate hours accumulated, my campus exposure expanded exponentially. One afternoon, after enjoying a lunch in the Seahawk campus cafeteria, I saw a flyer on a bulletin board in the lounge — writers for the university newspaper were being sought. I had been doing well in my early writing courses and decided to apply.

The Seahawk office resembled a small newsroom. A half-dozen desks occupied the space, and several students sat staring at their computer monitors. I interrupted a young lady to ask where I would find the news editor. Her gaze never left her screen — she merely pointed to a doorway. I walked over, looked in, and knocked on the opened door. Melissa Shaw, news editor, asked me in. I didn't even manage to get my whole name out when she shoved a story idea at me while she talked on the phone. She covered the phone and told me to have it written in two days.

I backed out of her office and made my way down to the student lounge. I dropped into a loveseat and read what she had given me. Gennadi Gerasimov, former personal spokesman for former Russian President Mikhail Gorbachev, had been enlisted to teach at the university as a distinguished visiting professor. The news editor wanted me to write his story. Just like that? I dropped the press release into my lap and shook my head. Gorbachev? I wrote the piece. It ran on page one.

During my senior year, I faced a dilemma. I had discovered that I loved to write — but I wanted to teach. Then, I learned about a new program at the university — the master of fine arts in creative writing.

Spearheaded by Philip Gerard, an author of fiction and nonfiction, the MFA program had been given the green light. The department had an impressive list of published authors ready to teach the finer points of creative writing — in fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. With the credential, I'd be able to teach writing and learn from some of the best in the business. I applied. With help from unknown sources, I was accepted.

Over the course of the next three years, I wrote and studied. A lot. I was challenged to find my “voice.” I was asked to develop characters. And then I met Clyde Edgerton. Edgerton had signed up to teach a one-year, two-semester novel writing course. Seats in that class were harder to come by than front row seats at a Pavarotti performance. Somehow, I made it in. For two semesters, Edgerton inspired me. He emailed editorial comments on my novel manuscript while in flight on a book-signing tour. He talked about point of view over salmon at the Bridge Tender in Wrightsville Beach. He spent hours annotating my chapters. I completed a 300-page rough draft in four months. He exhausted me, and it was wonderful.

A new ride

With the M.F.A. in-hand, I applied for teaching gigs, interviewing at Isothermal Community College in Spindale, a month after I graduated. Nancy Womack, Dean at ICC, called me the next day and offered me a job. I packed that day.

From that point on, my new ride has been exciting — exciting because I quickly learned I could motivate not only my students, but others who were considering a career change. I was asked to be the commencement speaker at ICC's GED Graduation Ceremony — what an honor. I gave those brave hearts a short version of my own career change. We connected; they knew I understood. Since then, I've spoken at other colleges (as well as

the Hyde County Correctional Facility) and have done my best to show them they can do it — if they really want to.

An opening at Beaufort County Community College allowed me to return to a landscape I'm more comfortable in. At BCCC, I've also become addicted to professional development — as well as teaching and writing. With support from administration, I've developed online classes, creative writing classes, presented at professional conferences, written and directed a play, written for the Washington Daily News, helped students get published, and taught part-time the last four years at East Carolina University. My students are usually surprised by my past. They don't expect an academic to have my background. What they might not realize is my background is probably responsible for my academic success. You just gotta keep the hammer down.

Bryan A. Oesterreich teaches English at Beaufort County Community College and East Carolina University.