Betty Neal Crutcher
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Over the past year, Richmond students have come to know a lot about President Ronald Crutcher, but the same cannot be said for the woman beside the president, Betty Neal Crutcher. Because students across campus have already been introduced to President Crutcher, Forum Magazine sat down with Betty Crutcher so that she could similarly introduce herself to Richmond students.
A southerner born and raised, Betty Neal grew up in Tuskegee, Alabama, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Throughout her life, Betty’s parents, Homer and Rosa, taught her and her three younger siblings the importance of education and equality. Her parents, along with several other relatives, participated in the Selma to Montgomery March, an event that had an impressive impact on her and the rest of the nation. Betty followed their example, taking an active role in a major historical event when she served as a poll worker in the Tuskegee Protest before continuing her education. Because she grew up on a college campus, Betty was eager to pursue higher education. She chose to attend Tuskegee Institute, now Tuskegee University, and graduated with a bachelor’s degree in sociology. Betty’s work ethic earned her a spot in an exchange program with the University of Michigan, where she pursued her graduate studies in public health administration. “It was the greatest shock of my life,” remembered Crutcher. “Not only from the cold weather, but also from the people I met, including the people who looked like myself. It was very different.” After attaining her master’s degree, she earned a Ph.D. from Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, in higher education with an emphasis on educational leadership and cross-cultural mentorship.

“The passion [for education] came from the experience that occurred for me, especially at Michigan,” said Crutcher. “There were people who came into my life who supported and cared and listened to me, who were outside of the classroom and outside of the professors. That was as important to my survival and sustainability in the cold of the Midwest as it was when I was down South. The family and support that I gained as a student at Michigan became something I thought one should look at as being of equal value in an educational perspective.”

On January 3, 1979, Betty and Ronald met on a blind date set up by mutual friends. He had just finished his doctoral work and had recently returned home after studying in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar. A scholar in her own right, she had just bought her first house and was ready to begin her life in Detroit. “Our hearts knew there was something very special about the date,” remarked Crutcher, and their hearts were right; by June the two were engaged and married in November, a mere 11 months after meeting.

After their wedding, Crutcher and her husband traveled and lived all over the country and world, while raising their daughter Sara. Crutcher believes these experiences taught her to be flexible and more open so that she could better engage with those around her. During her youth, the opportunity of living abroad was unthinkable. She recalled that in her early twenties, she visited her sister and her husband who were stationed with the U.S. military in Oslo, Norway. At the time, she thought that Norway would be the ultimate travel experience for her. Crutcher said she could not have imagined that she would both travel extensively, and reside in Germany. “It took a lifetime of experiences for me to grow and expand so that I could become an international citizen,” she said. “That’s how I see myself now: as a person of the world, not just a citizen of Alabama or Michigan or some place.”

These experiences have now brought Crutcher back to her native South. “I’m thrilled to be back because I love down-home people! I don’t know Richmond so I can’t wait to have enough time to just go from place to place and get lost, because I have no sense of direction, so that I can find my way. I yearn to be able to have a little more time to be in Richmond so I can get to know it better. I want to know Richmond so that I can be an ambassador for not only the University, but also for the city of Richmond. I love what I’ve seen so far.” Crutcher has rapidly found ways to get involved whenever and wherever she can, both on campus and around the city, including her newest role as a governor-appointed member of the board of trustees at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. She also serves as a senior fellow and mentor for the Oliver Wendell Holmes Society at the Harvard University School of Medicine.

Seeking an active involvement on campus as well, Crutcher now mentors 15 students at University of Richmond through various offices around campus. She meets with her group once a month to discuss topics of importance to campus and the nation. Crutcher’s kind and generous nature has certainly allowed the group to grow. “I keep adding students if they want to join the group,” she said. “I can’t say no. I try to be more structured like my husband, but I end up saying just come on in, everybody’s welcome!”

Crutcher specializes in cross-cultural mentoring when working with students on campus and elsewhere. “It’s the same thing as mentoring, but crossing the cultures in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and everything that you can imagine that would show a difference,” she said. “I then look for the commonalities in those differences along values, virtues, and vision.” She aims to use this style of mentoring to help students on campus to find the similarities they share with others in spite of whatever differences they may see. According to her, there is a special importance in learning from mentors with different cultural backgrounds. “Even though I grew up in a predominantly black community, if I had only been mentored by people who looked like me when I got to the University of Michigan, I would have been paranoid for the rest of my life about becoming close with and trusting of white people, given the history. For me it was very important to begin to trust...”

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– Betty Neal Crutcher, Ph.D.