

KENTUCKY

Alumni

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A portrait of George Wright, a Black man with a grey beard and glasses, wearing a black suit, white shirt, and a red and black striped tie. He is smiling and standing against a grey background.

George Wright:
President of Prairie View A&M University
has 36 years of teaching, research and scholarship

George C. Wright: Presidential Success

Lexington native rose from smart-alecky kid
to be university president

By Robin Roenker

George C. Wright '72 '74 AS still remembers the first time he ever stepped foot on the University of Kentucky's campus — or any college campus, for that matter. He was 11, and while he'd lived in Lexington all his life, it took a sixth grade field trip to bring him inside one of UK's buildings.

"I have a very clear memory of my first time on campus," says Wright, 62, a historian, former UK faculty member, and current president of Prairie

View A&M University (PVAMU), a member of the Texas A&M University system.

"I remember going into the Funkhouser Building and seeing all those science specimens in there. Walking around on campus planted a seed in me, one that I probably didn't know was there, until it germinated, six or seven years later, and I enrolled as a student myself at UK," says Wright, who graduated from Lexington's Lafayette High School in 1968.

Entering his 10th year now as president of PVAMU — a highly respected, historically black university — with 36 years of teaching, research and scholarship under his belt, it would be natural to assume Wright had been the type of kid that everyone just knew would make something of himself.

But that wasn't the case. His grades were poor. He acted up. He didn't take well to being told what to do. He struggled with feelings of shame at going from a single-family home to public housing after his father's battle with alcoholism and his parents' divorce.



**Prairie View A&M
University President
George Wright enjoys
greeting students.**

Photo: Courtesy PVAMU

In fact, childhood friends who knew him only by his nickname “Ricky” had trouble believing later in life that the smart-alecky, loud kid they once knew had grown up to become a respected university president. One person insisted that the two men — Ricky Wright and George Wright — had to be separate people. It was a mistake anyone could have made. While he’d always loved reading, especially from orange-bound sets of biographies in his school library with titles like “The Young Christopher Columbus” or “The Young Harriet Beecher Stowe,” Wright’s grades growing up weren’t stellar. He was the kid who was so loud and disruptive in church, some adults wondered why the preacher didn’t throw him out. He loved basketball and worshiped legendary UK players like Charles “Cotton” Nash, but after his freshman year — when everyone else grew four inches and he didn’t — he was cut from his school’s basketball team.

“I did very poorly at Lafayette,” Wright admits. “I wasn’t even sure college was an option for me. I was the opposite of a child prodigy, trust me on that.”

But through it all, two people in Wright’s life — his mother, Amanda Clay Wright, who, he says, was “a big believer in education,” and Reggie H. Johnson, his minister at Lexington’s Main Street Baptist Church — believed he would make something of himself. And as it turned out, their belief in him was enough.

A Window of Opportunity

George Wright was a senior in high school on April 4, 1968, the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated. It was the singular day that changed Wright’s life forever, not only because of the broad-reaching cultural loss of King’s life and work, but also because, on a personal level, it opened the door to the possibility that he could go to college.

In the aftermath of King’s assassination, the University of Kentucky, like many colleges, began recruiting African-American students more proactively, and that summer UK launched an eight-week program for African-American students from Lexington. Participants toured campus and Kentucky landmarks like Mammoth Cave and Cumberland Falls. They did preparatory class work and attended cultural events. If they completed the program, UK would grant them admission and financial support.

For Wright, the summer program and its promise of college access represented the window of opportunity he needed to begin recharting his future. After that, he never looked back, arriving on campus in the fall of

1968 to launch an impressive academic career that would see him earning his degree in history from UK in 1972, his master’s degree in



Photo: Courtesy PVAMU

history from UK in 1974, and then his doctorate in history from Duke University in 1977. In 2004, UK awarded him an honorary Doctor of Letters.

Just as significantly, UK’s 1968 summer program and a shared bus seat en route to a Shakespeare play led Wright to meet the woman who is now his wife of 42 years, Valerie Ellison

Wright, a Bryan Station High School graduate who received her bachelor’s degree in journalism at UK in 1972. A longtime newspaper journalist, Valerie Wright has for the last decade worked as an editor at Texas Monthly magazine.

The couple share two children, a daughter, Rebecca, who passed away in 2004, and a son, William Benjamin, who recently graduated from college.

“Valerie is the one constant that’s been there for me throughout my adult life,” says Wright, whose teaching and administrative career has taken him from the UK Department of History, where he was an assistant professor from 1977 to 1980, to the University of Texas at Austin, where he was a professor of history and vice provost for undergraduate education. Later, he moved to Duke University, where he was an endowed professor and director of the Afro-American Studies Program, and then again to the University of Texas at Arlington, where he was a vice president and provost, and now to his current position at the president’s desk at PVAMU.

George Wright teaches an entry-level history course, saving the university \$50,000 a year.



Photo: ExploreUK

In 1980, when George Wright was a young faculty member in the UK Department of History, it was then UK President Otis Singletary, right, who later became another of Wright’s close, life-long friends, advising him to accept the call to teach at the University of Texas at Austin.

“Valerie has helped me in everything that I’ve done,” Wright says. “She is my biggest supporter, and probably also my biggest critic, but I say that in a very positive way.”



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George Wright has maintained a long-time friendship with Terry Birdwhistell '74 AS, '78 CI, '94 ED, now dean of UK Libraries, and Birdwhistell's family.

UK Years

When George Wright enrolled as a freshman at the University of Kentucky, he was scared to death, he says. “I felt in over my head. I was certain after one semester, I was going to Vietnam. But I thought, ‘Well, why not give college a shot?’ What I discovered was that there were people everywhere at the University of Kentucky who were willing to help me. If I had had to do it on

my own, I would have drowned, but folks throughout the university gave me encouragement,” he says.

Staff at the registrar’s office, influential professors like Michael Adelstein in the Department of English, Rupert Pickens in the French Department and faculty in the Department of History, including Steve Channing and Richard Lowitt, whose focus on Southern history and race relations piqued Wright’s early interest

— all of them made Wright’s years at UK a wonderful experience, he says.

“When I got that first paper back from Richard Lowitt, it had more of his writing on it in red ink than mine, and I thought, ‘He must think I’m the dumbest person alive.’ But he pulled me aside and said, ‘This is really good!’” Wright says.

Wright credits another UK history professor, Charles Roland, with showing him how to be a scholar and to be balanced in perspective. It was a lesson that has served Wright well, as he has since researched and published scores of scholarly articles and three books dealing with African-American history and race relations in Kentucky. (Wright’s first book looks at lives of African Americans in Louisville between 1863-1930, while his second addresses racial violence in Kentucky between 1865 and 1940. His third book, published in 1992, offers a comprehensive overview of black history in Kentucky.)

Given the climate of the late 1960s, with Civil Rights and Vietnam, it was a tumultuous time to be on campus. But Wright dug in and studied hard, not allowing himself to become distracted by anything but getting an education. “As much as I loved UK basketball, I told myself, ‘That’s not why I’m here,’” he says. He and Valerie Ellison married in 1970 while sophomores. They moved to a house off campus, and he took a night job running computers at a local manufacturing company to help support them.

“I would work from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., then go to class from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m.,” says Wright. It was a grueling schedule, but a time in his life that he looks back on fondly.

“If it’s possible to love a university, then I love the University of Kentucky,” says Wright, noting that while he has been away from UK since 1980, not a year has gone by that he hasn’t been back. (Wright’s brother, Anthony Wright ’78 AS, and sister, Scottie Green ’05 AG, are also UK grads.) Wright served for years on the UK College of Arts & Sciences Advisory Board, is still an avid UK sports fan, and has even left his entire collection of papers and research to UK Libraries. His papers, housed in the George C. Wright collection, are under the care of his longtime friend Terry Birdwhistell ’74 AS, ’78 CI, ’94 ED.

Birdwhistell, dean of UK Libraries, says he and Wright think of each other almost as “brothers.” The two first met as master’s degree students at UK in the early 1970s and have maintained a close friendship ever since. In fact, Wright visited Birdwhistell’s family so often that Birdwhistell’s daughter, Jessie, grew up calling the spare room in their home “George’s room.”

“It was obvious right off the bat how talented George was and is. And no one outworked him in

George C. Wright honors

At the University of Texas – Austin, George C. Wright received the Jean Holloway Award for Teaching Excellence, the Eyes of Texas Award for excellence in service and the Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Award for Outstanding Black Faculty Member. He was awarded the Andrew W. Mellon Faculty Fellowship at Harvard University and was the Friar Society Centennial Fellow for Teaching Excellence, the Silver Spurs Centennial Teaching Fellow and the Lillian and Tom B. Rhodes Centennial Teaching Fellow at the University of Texas – Austin.

In 2005, Wright was inducted into the UK Alumni Association Hall of Distinguished Alumni.

terms of the amount of time he put into being a really good historian,” says Birdwhistell, who helped Wright acquire oral history interviews and archival research during the writing of his second book.

“I can remember some of those times in the late 1970s and early 1980s driving around to libraries throughout Kentucky and talking about his career plans. He’s very goal oriented. We would talk about where his career might take him, and we even imagined him being a university president one day. I knew even then any university would be lucky to get him,” Birdwhistell says.

In 1980, when Wright was a young faculty member in the UK Department of History, it was then UK President Otis Singletary, who later became another of Wright’s close, lifelong friends, who advised him to accept the call to teach at the University of Texas at Austin. With exception of his time at Duke, Wright has been with either the University of Texas system or the Texas A&M University system ever since.

Lauretta Byars ’72 SW, ’82 ED, now vice president of student affairs and institutional advancement at PVAMU, is a Lexington native and former administrator at UK who grew up attending the same church as Wright. She and her husband, Don Byars, often travel with George Wright and Valerie Wright, even celebrating their shared wedding anniversaries together each year.

“George is the first person I knew who aspired to be a university president, even while still in college,” Byars says. “He’s very task oriented, detailed, highly motivated, and energized to achieve his goals. He’s passionate about his role as president at Prairie View and has instituted many programs to enhance the quality of education for our students here.”

A Teacher at Heart

Last fall, George Wright attracted national media attention, even a Washington Post article and television coverage, when he decided to step back into teaching as a university president, because PVAMU was faced with a 15 percent budget cut.

Taking on an entry-level American history survey course with hundreds of students, Wright saved the university at least \$50,000 a year in a step that encouraged many of his vice presidents and deans to teach classes, as well. Some outside commentators argued that Wright was an example of what all administrators should be doing.

But for Wright, the underlying attraction of returning to the classroom wasn’t solely a budgetary issue. He simply missed teaching.



Submitted photo

“I’ve been masquerading all these years as an administrator, but I’m really a teacher,” says Wright. “That’s what I’ve always been. Getting back into the classroom allowed me to connect to students again in a way that I hadn’t been able to in nine years.”

Wright has received the highest teaching accolades of every university he’s been a part of, including two prestigious university-wide teaching excellence awards at the University of Texas – Austin, thanks in part to his passion for providing a historical context for his students.

“Students can go on their phones and look up George Washington,” he said. “I have to show them the significance of George Washington ... I have to try to engage them, bring them in.”

When Wright steps down from his presidency at Prairie View his plans are simple: “I want to be working with college freshmen. I don’t want to sit on an advisory board or a foundation,” he says. “I plan to teach.”

And, of course, he’ll keep finding his way back, often, to Lexington and to Kentucky, which has for so long been the focus of his research and scholarship. Wright is currently working on two books, the first, his own autobiography, tentatively titled “Growing Up Black in Kentucky,” and the second, a biography of Robert Charles O’Hara Benjamin, a black man who was assassinated in Lexington in 1900.

“Kentucky is always a part of where I’m going or coming from,” he says. ■

George Wright ’72 ’74 AS, far right, and his wife, Valerie Ellison Wright ’72 CI, enjoyed attending the NCAA National Championship game with George’s brother, Anthony Wright ’78 AS and his brother’s wife, Sheree Martin Wright ’81 BE.



Submitted photo

While growing up, George Wright, center, loved watching basketball and legendary UK players. He visited Lexington in 2011 and met with Charles “Cotton” Nash ’64 AS, right, and Terry Mobley ’65 ED, formerly of the UK Office of Development.