The One and Only Mr. Haskell



By Mary Ellen Collins



He taught fifth grade, English, economics, and Latin; drove the school bus; coached basketball; called football games; and built a high school from the ground up. There was seemingly nothing Bruce Haskell, beloved Headmaster from 1973 to 1985, couldn't or wouldn't do for Shorecrest. As he followed in the footsteps of his mother, Carleen Vinal Haskell, and grandmother, Emma Vinal, he created a pre-K-12 educational environment that was defined by personal connection, a feeling of community, and rigorous expectations—a set of hallmarks that has served students well for decades.

Interestingly, he didn't set out to be an educator. Having graduated from Duke University in 1965, he was on his way to a finance job in New York when his mother, headmistress Carleen Haskell, asked him to come to Shorecrest and fill in for a teacher temporarily.

He agreed to do it, recalling, "It was the most amazing experience. Right from the first day I had this sense that there was something about this that I not only liked, but something that I really wanted to do. It struck me that this could be a genuine calling."

And it was. Haskell decided to stay at Shorecrest and spent several more years teaching and coaching before taking on the Head of the School responsibilities when his mother retired.

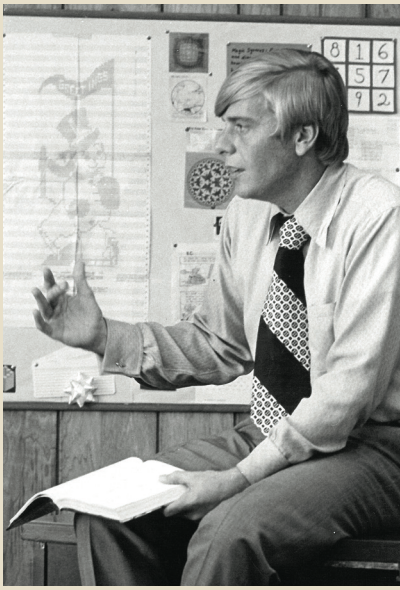
Described by many as a gentleman who was calm, kind, and accessible, his supportive approach benefited everyone he came in contact with. "Bruce was always there if I needed him—24 hours a day. All I had to do was pick up the phone," says Mary Booker, former Head who ran the Lower School under Bruce's leadership. "His focus was on the people and the families—totally. He was an incredible friend who became like a brother to me."

With the students, Haskell was "able to be a friend, a mentor, and as head of school, a disciplinarian," says Jimmy Rowe '76. "He had a unique skill set." Chas Reynolds '81 adds, "He was a big, youthful guy, extremely friendly, but there was no doubt among the student population who was in charge. He was in charge, and you respected him."

Throughout his tenure, and especially during the addition of the Upper School, Haskell never wavered from his sense of what Shorecrest should be. "He set the tone for the place and imbued it with a sense of family, a sense that 'we're in this together," says former board chair Marshall Craig. "And he shepherded that to become a full operation."

His focus on the educational process remained front and center, according to Bob Willis '77. "Bruce was always a teacher, first and foremost. He knew strong teaching – not buildings, not administrators – would establish a successful school. He committed himself to a lifetime of learning and, in creating Shorecrest's Upper School, he wanted everyone to experience the excitement of learning—not only students, but also faculty, staff, trustees, and parents."

Jimmy Rowe praises Haskell's guiding hand, saying, "He was the perfect leader to start a high school. He did a really good job of building it—year by year—and a really good job of hiring the teachers because he was able to recognize other peoples' strengths."



Presiding over the School's first commencement ceremony prompted this thought from Haskell, a man who was quick to share credit. "It was the first time I knew the school faculty, staff and community could see the fruits of their labor—namely, that Shorecrest was now widely-known as a quality educational institution."

"Bruce was always a teacher, first and foremost."



Haskell's understanding and empathy evoke grateful memories from former students like Carl Meyer '76. "He cared about us. I wouldn't have wanted teenagers coming in and out of my office when I was trying to work, but his door was always open to us—literally."

"I thought of him as a friend," says Sue Biddison Rowe '76. "He had our backs, but he expected a lot from us. I had a panic attack once during an economics test, and I just froze. I couldn't answer any of the questions. I went to him afterward and said, 'I don't know what happened.' He asked if I could take the test then and I said yes. I sat in the corner of his office, took it, and got an A. He was that kind of person—one who would give me the opportunity to take the test again."

Meyer recalls a less academic but equally meaningful decision Haskell made on his behalf. "I was a big fan of Frank Sinatra, and when I was the head of Student Council and we had a sock hop, I asked permission to play one Frank Sinatra song. Bruce gave his permission, and I played "Softly, As I Leave You." My brave date and I and Bruce Haskell and his date were the only ones on the dance floor. I thought it was so sweet of him to let me do it, and I will never forget that."

Sometimes a simple statement from Haskell spoke volumes, Meyer adds. "We were at one of my Junior Achievement Awards banquets, and Shorecrest students were just crushing it, winning award after award. When I was called up, Bruce said quietly, 'Be humble, now.'"

Haskell's connection to the School continued long after he retired. In addition to adding the role of "Shorecrest Dad" to daughters Jennifer Haskell Scott '96, Katie Haskell '98, and Shannon Haskell '17; he maintained enduring friendships with many of his former colleagues and students.

"He has continued to attend events and reunions throughout the years, which speaks volumes about his dedication to the School," says Ashley Gairing '77. "After years and years have passed, the guys in my class still look up to him. … And when I ran into him and told him I was pursuing my Ed.D., I was obviously eager to impress. He said, 'Be sure that you do something with that.' I've always felt accountable, and that's a very good thing."

Reynolds is another of many students who continued to feel Haskell's influence long after graduation. "When I came back to this area and got involved in alumni activities, I wanted Bruce to think I was doing well for the School. With good leaders that you liked and respected, no matter what age you are or how far away you are, you want to perform well for them. It's a lifelong feeling of accountability."

When Haskell delivered the commencement address in 2002, he said, "A school can be an alluring place with great physical plant and grounds, but a school like Shorecrest lives on and flourishes not just because of its walls, but also because of the continuity of its people and purpose." Those comments reflected the personal beliefs and priorities that lay beneath his many contributions as an educator and a leader.

"He was engaged in every component of the school," says Willis. "He was willing to give the School—his family asset—to a nonprofit institution so it could flourish. By adding the high school, he defined what the institution would be. There is no Shorecrest without Bruce Haskell."

Sadly, Bruce Haskell passed away on March 30, 2023, prior to the publication of this article. Thank you to the many alumni, parents, faculty and friends who attended his Celebration of Life at Shorecrest on April 29, 2023.



***Photo**: Former Heads Mike Murphy, Mary Booker Wall, and Bruce Haskell in 2005.*