

Dr. John Hunt Wins Hornaday Outstanding Faculty Honor

(6/3/14)

MONTICELLO, Ark. — John Hunt is an unlikely college professor.

A native of Paron, a tiny unincorporated community in rural northwestern Saline County, Hunt graduated from Paron High School in 1977 and lasted less than a year at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock before dropping out. “I wanted to chase girls and party,” says Hunt, laughing at the memory. “I was very successful at one and not so successful at the other.”

Hunt eventually drifted into the auto parts business, managing several NAPA stores in Little Rock, but knew he wasn't fulfilling his potential. “I always regretted not finishing college,” he says.

With the support of his wife, Sarah, Hunt went back to UALR and earned a degree in biology in 1996. In

1999, he received a master's degree in zoology from Auburn University and earned a Ph.D. in biology, also from Auburn, in 2004. He was 44 years old when he accepted his first full-time teaching job in the School of Mathematical and Natural Sciences at the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

Ten years later, Hunt is the winner of the Hornaday Outstanding Faculty Award, presented annually to UAM's top faculty member.

“I'm very proud to be recognized for doing what I love,” says Hunt, “but this is really an award for the whole department. A lot of this award is based on the success of our pre-med program, which is successful because we have a fantastic faculty. Jeff Taylor is the best biochemist in the state. Our physicist, Juan Serna, is second to none. Our microbiologist, Mary Stewart, is outstanding and we've got a fantastic dean in Morris Bramlett who is crazy supportive of the pre-med program and pre-med students. This is recognition of the whole math and sciences school.”

Affable and easy-going, Hunt tends to downplay his teaching success, but his colleagues aren't shy about singing his praises. “John is an outstanding teacher and an accomplished scientist,” says Bramlett. “We have an incredible group of faculty in math and science and John is a big reason for the success of our program. I can't think of anyone more deserving of this recognition.”

Hunt teaches three to four classes and one or two labs each semester in a variety of subjects, including Introductory Biology, Principles of Biology II, Comparative Anatomy, Evolution, Mammalogy, Anatomy and Physiology II, and Environmental Science as well as their corresponding labs. He also teaches an occasional special topics course, such as the one he just completed in the Bahamas in marine ornithology.

Hunt loves biology, drawn to the subject after taking up bird watching which led him to study the biology of birds and then the biology of everything. “I thought I was going to be a chemist when I first went to UALR,” says Hunt, “but the more I studied biology, the more it fascinated me. It's the basis of all life.”

His enthusiasm for biology is part of what Hunt says is necessary to be an accomplished teacher. “Obviously, you have to know your subject,” says Hunt. “But you also have to love your subject. Students can tell if you're excited by what you're talking about. I use Juan Serna as an example. Physics is hard and boring for most people, but he makes it exciting because he enjoys it, so his students appreciate it. I try to do the same thing. I love what I teach and I love talking about it.”

Hunt says his experience as a nontraditional student has made him keenly aware of the obstacles and challenges his students face. “It really hasn't been that long since I was in their place,” says Hunt. “A lot of times in academia, we lose sight of the fact that kids have real lives and real problems. It also helped me understand the importance of good academic advising because in 1977 at UALR, they had no one to advise me and I took the wrong classes and got bored and confused, which led me to drop out. Had I had good advisors, I might have stayed.”

Hunt's decision to come to UAM was a simple one. “I needed a job and they gave me one,” he says. “I really wanted to work in Arkansas. I'm from Arkansas. It's my home.”

UAM's size has a number of advantages for an aspiring college faculty member, says Hunt. “This job is a great job for an academic,” he says. “We're small. We know our students, know their strengths and weaknesses. Every student who comes in my classroom, I get to know their name, I know what they're interested in, what their goals are, and I can relate to a lot of them.”

“That's why John's a great teacher,” says Bramlett. “He has a real connection to his students and they sense it. That's a rare quality.”



The Hornaday Outstanding Faculty Award was created in 2010 by a donation from Dan and Charlotte Cruce Hornaday. Both Hornadays are graduates of Arkansas A&M and have many fond memories of the outstanding faculty that mentored and advised them through graduation and on to very successful careers with Exxon. Earnings from the investment of the principal of the endowment are used annually to provide a medallion and a cash award to the recipient.