

Leslie H. Garner '72

You get one view of life from Greenville, North Carolina. You get a different one from Vienna, Austria. And when you have seen life from both views, you may come away, if you are thoughtful, with a view of Eastern North Carolina's place in the world.

That has happened to Les Garner, a thoughtful man, the president of North Carolina Wesleyan College in Rocky Mount.

He can sound almost wistful about Greenville. "I grew up in a tobacco market town," he says. "A town that went to sleep when the heat came in July and woke up again in August when the tobacco market opened. Think what you will about tobacco, there was a culture surrounding the tobacco market. My wife remembers early in the morning sleeping on burlap-covered tobacco, going to market with her dad. That's gone."

Les' world began to expand when he came to Chapel Hill as a freshman in 1968. Throughout his college career, he planned to be a lawyer, "because lawyers run the government." But as graduation approached—a graduation that would see him earn a degree in history with highest honors and as a member of Phi Beta Kappa—he decided that if he really wanted to play a role in government policy-making, he should study at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

That decision took him to Boston, another expansion of his world, and led eventually to a master's degree and a Ph.D. from Harvard in public policy.

Then Vienna called. The director of the International Institute of Applied Systems Analysis let Harvard know he needed an assistant. Les applied and got the job. At age 24, his world view had expanded beyond what most of us know in a lifetime, working three years in Vienna with scholars from all over the world, including Nobel Prize winners, on such problems as energy needs, food production, and migration patterns.

Now to bring that world view home.

First, Chapel Hill called. The dean of the business school at Carolina was looking for a faculty member who was an "entrepreneur interested in the public sector." That described Les. At UNC, he set up the Government Executives Institute, co-directed the Management Development Program, and directed the Young Executives Institute.

The teaching experience at Chapel Hill confirmed in Les a love of the academic life, so he was able to answer gladly the most recent call, the one that brings him back 40 miles from where he grew up, as college president.

The world view gives him two complementary goals he is working toward for the health and benefit of North Carolina Wesleyan College and Eastern North Carolina. First, he wants Wesleyan firmly grounded in its community. He is committed, for instance, to preserving local arts and lore. Of that tobacco culture he remembers from Greenville, he says, "I don't know if anybody captured it or not, but it's a part of our heritage. And the liberal arts college is exactly a place to preserve the folklore, the oral history, so that people for years and years will know what Eastern North Carolina is all about."

And second, he wants Eastern North Carolina firmly grounded in today's world. The first major campus event after he became president brought the chairman and chief executive officer of Pepsi Co, among others, for a symposium on "Eastern North Carolina in a Global Economy."

Les Garner has a global perspective and a sense of home. Wesleyan College, Eastern North Carolina, and all of us are the beneficiaries.