

# Esphur E. Foster

Carolina started more than two centuries ago with a few young men who had the good fortune of very close relationships with the faculty and staff. As the University has grown, it has gained substantial prestige. And even in a much larger environment with a much higher student-faculty ratio, there is plenty of opportunity to cultivate mentors and support networks.

But to a student, it sometimes seems as if there's nobody to turn to who isn't already swamped with other concerns. Perhaps nowhere is the pressure higher than in the law school. It's fortunate that for the last 21 years, the law school has had Esphur Foster.

Judith Wegner recalls that when she was interviewing for the deanship, she misplaced a travel reimbursement check the school had sent to her. Her call for help reached the school's main lobby, a student gathering place which can resemble Grand Central Terminal. The stationmaster is the school's receptionist, Esphur Foster. Esphur could punch a button and transfer an anonymous job prospect to bookkeeping.

But instead, as is so often the case, she took on someone's little problem as her own – and made a new friend who now calls her “the powerful mother figure” of the law school. “She means the world to all members of the community here,” Wegner said.

Esphur has stretched far beyond her job description, transforming the receptionist's desk into a Welcome Wagon, a confessional, a clearinghouse of information that makes academic life a little less stressful – one individual at a time. “She always has a warm smile and a nice hug, and on occasion a bit of scripture, if you look like you need it,” said Patricia Timmons-Goodson '76, a member of the North Carolina Court of Appeals who often visits the school.

The school's administrators come to her for advice; faculty members bounce ideas off her; and students turn to her for everything from housing to family crisis. She never forgets a face and knows most of the students by name. She keeps an eye out for those with problems outside the school and alerts the faculty.

In her own words, Esphur does “whatever has to be done to make this a pleasant stay. I let them unload on me. Sometimes I let them have a pity party, and sometimes I don't. I overhear a lot of conversation, and I know the right professor to tell them to go see.”

Remember — no one ever told her to do all this. When the housing department ended the practice of posting available housing for law students, Esphur didn't have to develop her own form, spread the word in the graduate community and in Chapel Hill, and manage her own housing bureau.

She also didn't have to start a tutoring program for local kids after the law school closed for the day. She and her friend, Alean Farrington, began five years ago conducting a program for at-risk children called A Mission in Excellence. Using undergraduates and law students, they have connected the kids with one-on-one tutors – as many as 30 at a time.

Esphur's loving relationship with the law school is no secret – she received the Chancellor's Award for Meritorious Achievement in 1991, and the University's C. Knox Massey Distinguished Service Award in 1992. The school's new lobby will have a skylight directly over the reception desk. It is being designed to make Esphur a central figure.

Law school is an everyday challenge, and often there isn't time to confront problems, or find a sympathetic ear amid the rush. One person has made it her responsibility to snag people who otherwise might fall through the cracks. “There's nothing I can do to help them academically,” she says, “but if there was I would. But I can give moral support.”

She doesn't crank out history texts, or confer degrees, or hold up the Bell Tower when the wind blows. But there are a lot of people in the law school who are certain she could, if the need presented itself.

She is, quite simply, that person whom parents hope their children will chance upon when they go off to the big university. She is the constant to alumni returning to a place that changes continuously. You hear it again and again from UNC-trained attorneys: Esphur Foster is one of the reasons I got through law school.