

Bristol Herald Courier

'Forward With Faith: The Milligan College Story' Historical play heralds college's 150 years

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TOM NETHERLAND SPECIAL TO THE HERALD COURIER

MILLIGAN COLLEGE, Tenn. — Neither cars nor trucks roamed the roads during the earliest of days of the Buffalo Male and Female Institute.

The what?

You know the college known today as Milligan College.

Written and directed by Milligan alumna Rosemarie Shields, "Forward with Faith: The Milligan College Story" heralds the college's 150 years with a history-encompassing storyline. Set to stage Oct. 20, 22 and 23 at Milligan's McGlothlin-Street Theatre in the Gregory Center, the show details the Christian liberal arts college's humble beginnings and gradual maturation as a widely respected institution of learning.

"There were many obstacles that came along (during the school's 150 years)," said Rosemarie Shields, who graduated from Milligan in 1959. "It wasn't exactly stormy. It wasn't exactly smooth."

Perseverance accompanied the founders of Milligan College. Coupled with the Bible, faith and drive the school survived multitudes of challenges through the decades.

"There were enough people with faith and with vision who helped the school to carry on, which is why I called this 'Forward with Faith,'" Shields said.

Several fires emblazon the history of Milligan College. The Great Depression of the 1930s took its toll. Likewise, World War II during the mid-1940s occupy space within the annals of Milligan College.

"Milligan College actually turned its campus over to the navy for a couple of years during World War II," Shields said.

"There were no students for two years. The play shows some of the people, men and women, who came to the rescue of Milligan through the years."

Forward with Faith

An hour before rehearsal began on Wednesday evening, Shields sat in the back row of the McGlothlin-Street Theatre. She awaited the arrival of the core of her cast, 13 actors chosen to play multiple roles within the show.

"They play at least five different characters," Shields said.

Actor Andrew Wissmann, a 2016 Milligan College graduate, plays six roles including three different school presidents in "Forward with Faith." As he rehearsed his lines about a dozen rows away from Shields, the retired Milligan humanities professor advised incoming actors.

One, freshman Bible major Colby McKeehan of Carter County, plays a whopping 10 roles in "Forward with Faith." A small wooden cross dangled from around the prospective preacher's neck.

"Projection, articulation, enunciation," Shields said to McKeehan. "You want to reach the people in the back row."

To another actor she instructed “slow down, slow down.” Yet another she instructed to “speed up” his entry on stage. So it goes during the gradual flourishing of a play.

Moments later she leaned over in her seat to comment about the show.

“There are eight different scenes,” Shields said of the script and show that she wrote two years ago. “No intermission. No breaks.”

Rehearsals began in August. The cast, which includes freshmen and recent graduates along with a professor, seemed nearly ready throughout the night’s subsequent rehearsal. They were sharp.

Milligan College professor of chemistry, Dick Lura, plays a handful of roles. In preparation, he bought a 1920s wooden golf club for his golfing scene with President Warren G. Harding. He went to much greater extent.

“I shaved my beard for this, after (wearing it for) 34 years,” Lura said.

One actor will dye his hair while another will straighten his head full of curly hair for their respective roles. Each later bowed their head during a prayer scene, which highlighted the underlying theme of the show and school: Faith.

During rehearsals for the play as during the 150 years of Milligan College, faith played the most essential part of all.

“Every time. Every president. Every situation, it takes faith,” Shields said. “The Hopwoods arrived on horseback from Sneedville, Tennessee. When the Hopwoods came there was one acre, one building and \$1,250 in debt. They needed faith.”

Jocephus and Sarah Hopwood classify as pillars within the vivid history of Milligan College. The educators arrived on campus of the Buffalo Male and Female Institute with intent.

“They wanted to educate men and women, blacks and whites,” Shields said. “This was at the end of the Civil War. There was no money in Carter County. I think that’s interesting. And it was Christian.”

Within six years of their arrival, the school earned its state charter and became Milligan College.

Then as now, Bible classes remain a campus and curriculum staple. Look to the Bible for Proverbs 18:15: “The heart of the prudent getteth knowledge; and the ear of the wise seeketh knowledge.”

Christian references emerge throughout the campus — from an engraving on a rock outside the theater to courses in classrooms and sermons in the church to Shields’ “Forward with Faith” play. Faith occupies plentiful space.

“We pray,” Shields said. “In the play, we sing hymns, we pray, we have church. We’re still a church school.”

That’s reflected from McKeehan’s wooden cross to the play’s content to Seeger Chapel on campus. While the play does not and certainly cannot be expected to retell the entire 150 years of Milligan’s history, its essence reverberates.

Good news blown as if through Gabriel’s horn, “Forward with Faith” achieves exactly that.

“It’s a labor of love,” Shields said. “What I’m hoping is that people who know nothing about Milligan will learn something.”

Tom Netherland is a freelance writer. He may be reached at features@bristolnews.com.