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POLITICAL AMBITION

A lifelong passion for politics leads to a career as an award-winning professor

By TERESA KILLIAN

Classmates of **Lee Cheek '83 MPA '88** knew he was destined for a career in politics, and he was, although not in the way they might have expected. As an undergraduate, Cheek was vice president of the student body, organized a political science speaker series, helped charter WCU's chapter of Pi Gamma Mu International honor society and led numerous student political activist groups. He was such a charismatic, high-energy student leader that the 1982 April Fools' Day edition of the *Western Carolinian* joked Cheek had taken over campus in a coup. Cheek was and is known as a powerful public speaker, an enthusiastic self-starter and the kind of leader who inspires others to get involved. These qualities helped Cheek in jobs from congressional aide to church pastor, and led to a career that enabled him to marry lifelong interests in politics, religion and helping others.

Cheek is an award-winning political science professor and scholar at Brewton-Parker College in Mount Vernon, Ga. His publications have been described as groundbreaking and definitive, and scholars worldwide seek him for consultation. "From an early age, I was fascinated by politics because of its centrality to all decision-making," said Cheek, professor of political science and vice president for college advancement at Brewton-Parker. "Granted, the process is most imperfect, but my interest has always been on how to make the process better."

His first brush with politics was at age 4 when he noticed the commercials and shiny "Goldwater" buttons from the 1964 presidential race. A few years later, he joined his dad in distributing fliers and campaigning for a legislative

candidate. His participation increased in the regular conversations about political issues around the Cheek dinner table. By the time he enrolled at WCU, he knew he wanted to major in political science and history, and the quality and creativity of his work made an impression on his professors. "Even as an undergraduate, you could see his potential developing in academia," said Gordon Mercer, WCU professor of political science.

After earning his bachelor's degree from WCU, Cheek went on to graduate from Duke Divinity School and study at Christian Albrechts Universitat in Germany. He returned to WCU for a master's degree in public administration, then earned his doctorate in political theory from The Catholic University of America.

Cheek has authored what Don Livingston, another WCU professor, describes as an impressive quantity of high-quality published work – six books and dozens of articles on topics from Methodist history to the political philosophy of southern statesman John C. Calhoun. His accolades include winning the "Professor of the Year" award three times at Brewton-Parker and the 2008 Jordan Excellence in Teaching Award, the college's most prestigious teaching honor. He also recently received the WCU Alumni Association Academic and Professional Achievement Award – a recognition his classmates say is well-deserved. "Lee Cheek has always been a man of character who has selflessly dedicated himself to serving the betterment of society and individuals," said the retired Lt. Col. **Edward M. Levy '82**. "He has inspired his peers, students and all those around him."