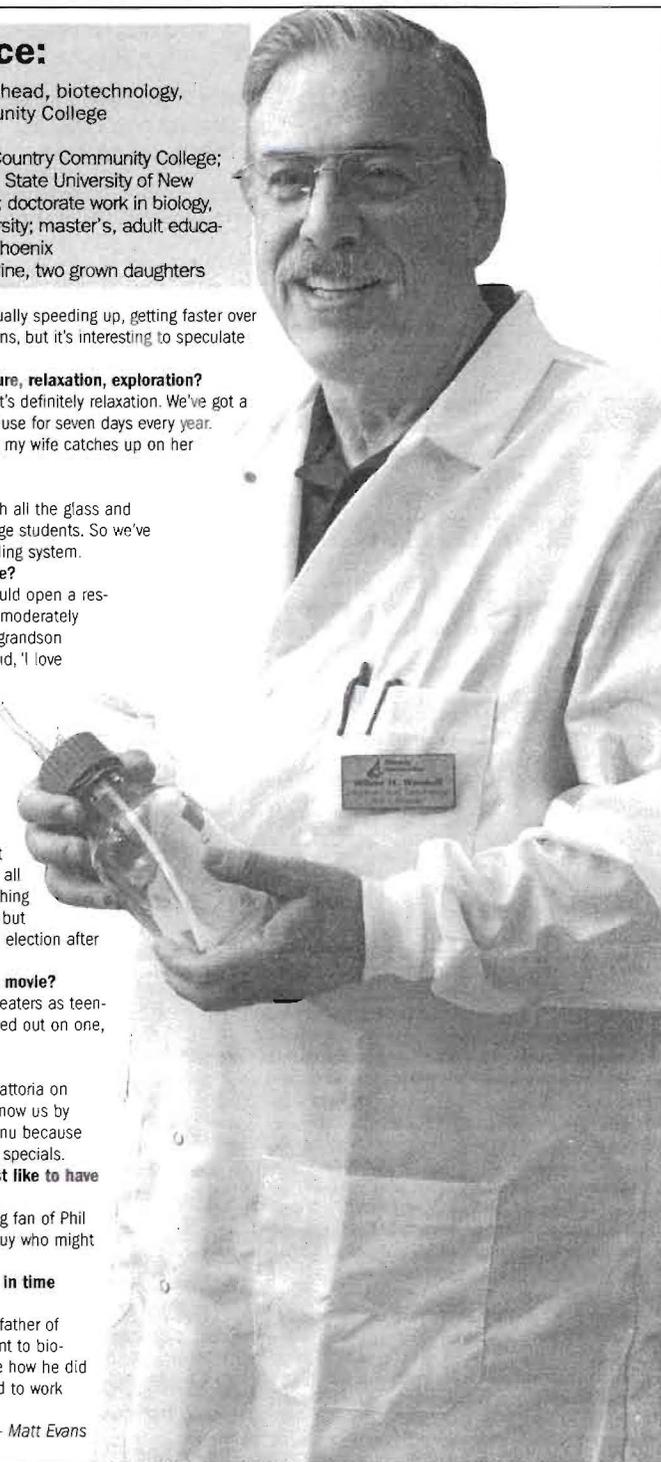


Up close: Bill Woodruff

At a glance:

Title: Department head, biotechnology, Alamance Community College
Age: 64
Education: North Country Community College; bachelor's, biology, State University of New York at Plattsburgh; doctorate work in biology, Wake Forest University; master's, adult education, University of Phoenix
Family: Wife, Katherine, two grown daughters



BURLINGTON — There aren't many people who have been in a position to observe virtually the entire history of the Triad's biotechnology industry firsthand, but Bill Woodruff is one of them.

Woodruff, who was honored in March during Triad BioNight for his work in academic development, is the department head for the state's oldest community college biotech program. He has been at Alamance Community College for 25 years.

Why was Alamance Community College so early to biotechnology education at the technical school level? The head of biology here in 1985 was just a very forward-thinking fellow who saw what was coming.

What had been your background before taking over the program? I started out as a lab technician at the same school where I got my bachelor's. I went to Wake Forest for my doctorate and came to work at ACC while the biotech program was still brand new. I'd watched my professors in the past and thought it would be a piece of cake, but found that a community college is a whole different world. At first I'd have nothing more than a course description for a class — no textbook, no notes. We developed seven courses in two years and I was so busy I put my dissertation on the back burner, and then later found out I'd put it off too long to complete it. The doctorate is the only thing I've ever tried and not followed through on, and it still bugs the heck out of me.

How has the program grown in terms of students and courses? For our first 17 years we were the only biotech program in the state — most of the talk then was still about tobacco and furniture as the big deals, and I think the lowest number of students we had was about 13. Once the state started to make the big biotech push we've been up to between 65 and 75 students in the program, and around 20 graduates each year. A lot of our students aren't after the degree; they already have a bachelor's and are adding skills.

Lots of other community colleges now also offer biotech programs. Is there enough demand for all of them?

The old "if you build it, they will come" saying from "Field of Dreams" has been a bit of a problem. Some schools started programs even though they didn't have any industry, thinking that employers would then come in. The lag time from when students start graduating but can't find a job will kill you.

What are we still missing from our educational resources for the industry?

We've always lacked good solid relationships with companies. Industry is mostly concerned with higher-level degrees, but we can give them people who can do the work on their line. But we've always had to, if not beg, at least seek out interactions with companies. It surprises me how hard it is.

What kind of success are your students having finding jobs close to home when they graduate?

We've been working on better tracking but it's still mostly anecdotal. But I feel like the rate of hiring is very high, maybe around 90 percent. What varies is how long it takes. We had one year where 80 percent of the class had jobs lined up before they graduated. They're still getting the jobs, but it's just taking a little longer.

What has kept you in your job for so long? Ever been tempted to jump to industry?

I got my first job in a lab at 19 by pure luck, and I've loved it ever since. I can't say I've never thought about changing, but when you're working with a student and that light comes on and you can see that they just got it, that's a big thrill for me. I'm in my 25th year here and I'm eligible for retirement, but I don't see that happening for at least another five years or so.

Do you think the biotech industry has lived up to its potential as a job engine in the Triad?

It has more potential than it has shown so far. I think a lot of companies got scared by the recession and investors backed off, wanting returns much faster than an industry like biotech can produce. I'm not a businessperson, but it looked to me like the industry hit the brakes because it was afraid.

What is one piece of trivia on any subject that you find interesting?

I'm an amateur astronomer. I recently learned that scientists believe the rate

of expansion of the universe is actually speeding up, getting faster over time. I have no idea what that means, but it's interesting to speculate on.

Favorite vacation style: adventure, relaxation, exploration?

At our age, for my wife and me it's definitely relaxation. We've got a timeshare in Cocoa Beach that we use for seven days every year. I play golf six out of the seven, and my wife catches up on her reading by the pool.

A workplace pet peeve?

Lab work is like kitchen work with all the glass and pans, and I work with a lot of college students. So we've made "cleaning up" part of the grading system.

What do you know how to make?

My children always tell me I should open a restaurant because love to cook. I do moderately spicy, often Mexican or Italian. My grandson was over the other night and he said, "I love to eat Poppy's food!"

What's something not many people know about you?

From 1972 to 1980, I was a judge in upstate New York. I don't have a law degree, but local magistrate is an elected position there so I had to get certified to interpret the law. I'd lived in that community all my life and I wanted to give something back to it. I lost the first time I ran but later was appointed, and then won election after that.

Have you ever walked out on a movie?

Both my wife and I worked in theaters as teenagers. I don't think we've ever walked out on one, but we have fallen asleep.

Favorite place to eat?

One of our favorites is Prego's Trattoria on Church Street in Burlington. They know us by name and I rarely order off the menu because they've always got such interesting specials.

Which celebrity would you most like to have as your neighbor?

I'd take any good golfer. I'm a big fan of Phil Mickelson; he seems like a good guy who might give me free lessons.

If you could time travel, where in time would you go?

To meet Louis Pasteur. He's the father of immunology, which is very important to biotechnology. I would be awed to see how he did what he did with as little as he had to work with.

— Matt Evans