

James L. Holly, M.D.

A Brief and Selected History of My Life With Northwestern State University (1918 – 2016)

By James L. Holly, MD

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My history with Northwestern State University began vicariously. NSU was founded in 1884 as the Louisiana State Normal School. In 1970, Northwestern State College became Northwestern State University, five years after my wife and I graduated in 1965. My paternal grandmother, Ilda Garnett Simpson Holly, my father's mother, and perhaps the most important person in my life until I finished high school, completed a one-year education certificate from the Normal School in 1918 and then taught elementary school in a one room school house built by my grandfather and attached to their home. She was a remarkable person and would be a worthy member of the Long Purple Line, like thousands more like her.

My personal history with Northwestern State College began in September, 1949, which was the summer my family moved from Camp Livingston outside of Ball, Louisiana, to a Louisiana Power and Light Company house on Cane River Road (officially to be named Fish Hatchery Road later) at its intersection with what was called The Lateral – a one mile, straight, dirt road which connected Cane River Road with Highway I south of Natchitoches. Highway 1 runs from Northwest Louisiana above Shreveport to Grand Isle at the Gulf Coast in extreme South Louisiana. As I started my education on Highway 1 north, my wife and I started our marriage teaching school sixteen years later in Golden Meadow, Louisiana, on Highway 1, fifteen miles north of Grand Isle.

In September, 1949, my brother and I were enrolled in the second and third grades at the Laboratory Elementary School at NSC. It was at the Lab School that I discovered that I was functionally blind – I could not see the blackboard sitting at the back of the room. My eyesight was 20/400 when my eyes were dilated which paralyzed the muscles which allowed the lens to accommodate to allow me to see clearly without glasses but that only worked close up. As I aged, like all of us, the accommodation ability was gradually lost, requiring glasses for all functions. It was on the NSC Lab School playground that I worked through the first few days of wearing very strong corrective lenses as every stepped looked to me like I was stepping off of a cliff. It was an incident on that playground which also resulted in my telling my mother the first lie I can remember telling. I was under instructions not to go bare footed at school but it was so much easier to run without shoes, I ignored that rule. One day, I stepped on a bee which stung me. My foot swelled and when my mother asked me what had happened, I told her that a bee was attacking our Pekinese puppy and I stepped on it in our yard at home. Noble, courageous and thoroughly dishonest. By the way, she didn't buy it and I had to tell the truth.

The next year – 1950 – East Natchitoches Elementary opened and I began the third grade there. In the sixth grade in 1954, I attended my first symphony concert at Northwestern. Dr. Joseph Carlucci was

the conductor. Twenty-five years later, in 1975, my wife and I attended our first concert in our new home of Beaumont, Texas only to discover, with delight, that the conductor of the Beaumont Symphony was Dr. Joseph Carlucci. It is always amazing at how life moves in circles.

During my education in Natchitoches Parish public schools, we occasionally would swim at the Natatorium on the Northwestern campus. I can still remember the smells of that very unique facility. In 1956, I entered the eighth grade at Natchitoches High School which was on Northwestern's campus. One of our required courses that year was social science. An education student from Northwestern was our student teacher. One day, she called me out of the class and addressed my "attitude," after telling me she knew I was bright. With no ill-intent, I said, "What do you mean by 'attitude.'" The next day, she did not return. Another Northwestern encounter.

Northwestern, Natchitoches High and the Science Fair

In 1958, I was in the 10th grade. My closest friend who was to be the Valedictorian of our class was entering the science fair at Northwestern, I decided to do the same so we could spend some time together. He prepared an outstanding display and I didn't. As the judges approached me on "judgment day," I realized how embarrassing this was going to be. The fun was over and the Piper was about to claim his due. I had a fruit juice can with a two inch copper tube soldered into the side, a Bunsen burner, a pin wheel and water. Nothing else; no posters, no papers, nothing. As the judges stepped in front of me, I remembered the formula for rotary horsepower, and proceed to present my "steam turbine" which had a measurable horsepower of 0.0013. That afternoon as we set in the awards ceremony in the Northwestern Fine Arts Auditorium, my very deserving and brilliant friend was passed over and I received an "honorable mention." This was my first recognition that life is often not fair. That same spontaneity would be present four years later when I met my future wife in a speech class at Northwestern.

After graduating from NHS in May, 1961, I entered Texas A&M University, then Texas A&M College, to study pre-veterinary medicine. At that time Louisiana did not have a veterinary school. My escapades there are still legend but that will be for another time. I was a good student but In October, 1961, I received Jesus Christ as my personal Savior and thought that I would become a minister, so in June, 1962, I started summer school at NSC.

Where and how I met my wife at Northwestern State University September, 1962

At registration in the fall semester of 1962, Dr. Beinvenu asked me why I was "running" away from science? I had in advanced science and math at A&M made "As" As it was to be, in 1967, after completing an undergraduate degree in history and philosophy, (1965) marrying (1965), teaching school (1965-1966) and doing a master degree in history at Baylor (1966-1967), I returned to science and then to medical school.

But, I am ahead of my story. Flashback to September, 1962, I was enrolled in a speech class with Mr. Graham as the teacher. In October (I was 18 years old), we were assigned a speech with a visual aid. Knowing there were eight students ahead of me in the alphabet, and also knowing that Mr. Graham could not get through eight speeches in one hour, I attended class unprepared. That was not unusual for me, but in this case I made a strategic mistake.

Remember, the assignment was a speech with a visual aid. In case it is not clear to you, a visual aid, by definition, is something you can see. When Mr. Graham saw that I had nothing with me that he could see, he knew that I did not have a visual aid. Because he and I had a love/hate relationship -- I loved him and he hated me, that pattern seems to be common place in my life -- he skipped eight students and called on me.

Well, the die was cast and I was about to die. The choice was nothing or something. At the moment, with my future wife sitting in the class but we had not yet met, and with nothing meaning a "zero," I chose "something" and stood up. Mr. Graham straightened up and looked quizzically, as if to say, "He has no visual aid, what is he going to do?"

As I walked to the front of the class, I cast about desperately for a visual aid, which at the least had to be visible. The only thing I saw was a piece of chalk but we specifically could not use the blackboard. I picked up a piece of chalk and turned to face the class. Mr. Graham had his hand up to say I could not use the blackboard, but before he could say anything I took three bold steps forward, tossed the chalk into the air and watched it crumble to the floor. I had my visual aid, now I just needed a speech.

I then asked, "What made the chalk fall to the floor?" I answered my own question, saying, "You think it is gravity, but I am telling you that it is the little green people. They live in the air and they are cleaning their homes." I then gave a fifteen-minute speech on the little green people. I had one in my pocket which they could not see because they did not believe in them. Part of my speech was a brief dialogue with my invisible friend, one of the little green people.

After the class, Mr. Graham would give you your grade. Shamelessly, I asked. He showed me his grade book. I had an A- with a question mark. I asked about the question mark and he said, "It was excellent, but I want to know when you prepared it?" I smiled, shrugged and walked out. My wife to be remembers it the same way.

Three weeks later, we were assigned an extemporaneous speech. A student would stand in front of the class, the teacher would give the topic and off the top of the student's head, a speech had to be given. I would have argued that I had already done that. When my turn came, Mr. Graham gave me the subject "the alarm clock." Before "-ock" was out of his mouth, I said, "In 1783, in Philadelphia, John Smith first conceived of combining a timing device with an alarming device..." At this point, Mr. Graham stopped me and said, "You know too much about alarm clocks," which comment made me start laughing. He said, "You made all that up!" I nodded yes and he turned bright red! He then said, "OK, Mr. Smarter-than-your-Pants, give me a speech on the hole in the doughnut." Through experience I knew a great deal more about doughnuts than alarm clocks so I gave him the speech.

Northwestern and Jackie Smith

In the fall and spring of 1962-1963 another permanent connection with Northwestern and my wife as forged. When I posted this on my face book, I entitled it: "**Northwestern State University – The Long Purple Line – Jackie Smith – the NFL Hall of Fame.**" For NFL Football fans the name Jackie Smith is that of a NFL Hall of Fame legend. He changed the way his position was played and he was a tour de force in his era of play. The following story was published this week about Jackie Smith:

[http://www.si.com/nfl/2016/.../19/jackie-smith-super-bowl-drop.](http://www.si.com/nfl/2016/.../19/jackie-smith-super-bowl-drop)

All of this is public knowledge but once upon a time, there was a fifteen-year old boy, who was not a great athlete but who had the privilege of watching the 18-year old Jackie Smith training for the high hurdles in track and field when Jackie was a freshman at NSU and the boy was a junior in high school. With a video-tape memory, this boy remembers watching Jackie Smith “step” over the high hurdles. The boy remembers that he thought that the high hurdles was a pole-vault event, or at least a high jump; but Jackie “stepped” over them and he did it at a high rate of speed.

The boy remembers thinking – because he knew that Jackie also played football -- what a terror it would have been for someone to tell him that he was to stand in front of Jackie, as Jackie ran full speed, and that he was to tell Jackie he was not allowed to go where he was headed. The next year the boy was sixteen as he started his senior year in high school and Jackie Smith was still there. After his freshman year at Texas A&M this young man, now 18, returned to NSU as a sophomore. To his surprise, he and Jackie were taking a course together and they studied together some. They played paddle ball and the boy remembers bouncing off the body of Jackie as the ball bounced off the walls of the court.

By now, you know that this boy was me. I have thought of Jackie many times since those early years. I watched him play on TV and was proud to have known him, however briefly. I remember his athleticism, strength and speed, but mostly I remember that he was an incredibly kind person and he was always a gentleman.

Today, January 26, 2016, I talked to Jackie for the first time in fifty-three years. He was as nice as I remember him. I felt like a kid again, enjoying the attention of a hero. I hope that Jackie and I can enjoy a meal but even if we don't, today's visit was special to me.

In 2000, Jackie Smith was honored with the highest award Northwestern can confer upon an alumnus; he was elected to The Long Purple Line. How worthy he is to have that honor. And, in March of this year, that 15-year old boy, who watched him in awe, will join him in that honor. An incredible experience for an ordinary athlete who simply loved to run and remembers one who could run like the wind and who could also clear the way of any humans who stood in his way.

Northwestern's Greatest Gift to Me

The greatest gift Northwestern gave me was the introduction to my wife. Carolyn Bellue and I became great friends but did not date. In the summer of 1964, the Louisiana Baptist Convention through the Northwestern Baptist Student Union sent me to Kenya in a Summer Missionary program. That was a wonderful experience. Carolyn's father sent me twenty dollars for the trip. Traveling back through Israel, I bought Carolyn a Mother-of-Pearl New Testament and wrote in it, “Dear Sis,” as at that time she was only like a sister. When I gave it to her, she said, “I'll carry this in ‘my’ wedding.” Eleven months later, she carried in “our” wedding.

Africa and the Civil Rights Movement

After returning from Africa, In October, 1964, I addressed the Baptist Student Union State Convention held in Monroe, Louisiana. Having matured into a commitment to respect the person and the rights of all people, having been part of a church which sang “red, and yellow, black and white,” and after my experience in Africa, I was deeply committed to social and ethnic equality. In my speech, I addressed civil rights and racial equality, after which every one present avoided me. I was never asked to speak

in the State again, until 1994, thirty years later when I was asked to address 500 community leaders in Lake Charles, Louisiana, about abortion. I asked those present to raise their hands if they were for abortion: none did. I asked them to raise their hands if they were against abortion: all did. I added, "Well, we have that settled; let's talk about the blood brother, the fellow traveler, the co-laborer with the abortionist who is the bigot and the racially prejudiced. Through a one-hour address, I affirmed the equality of all men, women, boys and girls and encouraged all to embrace civil rights. This is all the result of my maturation at Northwestern.

In November, 1963, we experienced the tragedy and trauma of President Kennedy's assassination. When I learned of this, I was walking out of North Hall headed to a French class. In the class, I called the authorities and verified that the President was dead. Our mourning began in the class. That night, wandering around the campus in a daze, I ended up at the Newman Club. An active Southern Baptist, I spend the entire night with two other students visiting with Father Cornelius O'Brian, the Jesuit leader of the center. With different approaches to our faiths, we remained good friends for the next two years.

Returning to Northwestern and The Long Purple Line

In May, 2015, Carolyn and I returned to Northwestern for our 50th Graduation Anniversary. This was the capstone of the Hollys and Northwestern. Unknown to Carolyn, four years before, I had endowed a Distinguished Professorship in her name and in the fall of 2014 added a Scholarship in our mother's names. Those endowments were announced at the 50th Anniversary.

When NSU President, Dr. Jim Henderson, called me on January 15, 2016 to notify me of my election to the NSU Long Purple Line, I was elated. After receiving the Distinguished Alumnus award from my school of medicine in 2012, I did not think anything could "top" that. Little did I realize that such an award from NSU would be so very significant to me. Carolyn and I arrived at NSC as children and we left as young adults. The course of our life was set at NSC. Our relationship which has lasted a life time was forged there. The connection between Carolyn's family and mine, particularly my grandmother were woven at Northwestern.

I have come to know that Northwestern is 132 years old with over 70,000 graduates, and since its formation in 1990, the Long Purple Line has had 119 inductees. Four will be added March 18, 2016. I am honored and truly humbled to be one of those. Yet, if the honor were accurate, it would be to Dr. and Mrs. James L. Holly, as absolutely nothing in my life, since our wedding day August 7, 1965, when I was 21 years old, has been accomplished without Carolyn's support, encouragement, collaboration and challenge. I have so much to be thankful to Carolyn and to Northwestern for, and now this honor is added to that debt. The Apostle Paul admonished us to "owe no man anything except a debt of love." My wife and I owe Northwestern a large debt of love. I owe my wife a debt of and for everything. I will spend my life hence forth continuing to try to repay a small part of that debt to both.