

# THE STATESMAN

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## On Campus Seminars:

- Feb 15-17 [Rethinking Leadership](#)  
Mar 2-3 [The Declaration of Independence  
& The U.S. Constitution](#)  
Mar 17 [Thomas Jefferson Ed. Forum](#)  
Apr 16-21 [Statesmanship Invitational 2007](#)  
May 1-26 [Psychology](#)  
May 2-25 [The Founders' Constitution](#)  
May 21-22 [The Anti-Federalist](#)  
Jun [European Field Experience](#)  
Jun 7-8 [Core & Love of Learning](#)  
Jun 7-16 [Youth For America](#)  
Jun 11-12 [The Love of Learning  
Transition To Scholar](#)  
Jun 14-15 [Scholar Phase](#)  
Jun 4-Jul 28 [Latin](#)  
Jul 27-28 [How to Read a Book](#)  
Jul 9-28 [The Mountain Seminar](#)  
Jul 18-19 [Liber League Summit](#)  
Jul 9-Aug 3 [Freshman Prep](#)  
Aug 13-29 [War](#)

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## An Account of My **Unexpected** And **Unannounced** Visit to George Wythe College

By Kevin Smith

October, 2006. Cedar City, Utah. A few months ago, being new to the area, I attended a religious service in Cedar City, UT. I was on assignment from my wife, who along with my children, was still living in Southern California. My general assignment was to find a congregation in which we could, with like-minded souls, exercise our right to religious freedom. My specific assignment was to find a congregation that was friendly that had lots of children and youth. If I could find a congregation that also provided some spiritual fulfillment, I would have exceeded her expectations (requirements).

The first congregation I attended in Cedar City met all three criteria. I called my wife and informed her of my luck (maybe a miracle) albeit there was one caveat—the principal language spoken was Spanish. I was encouraged (required) by her to keep looking.

The next week my family visited Cedar City and my wife indicated the only area she liked in and around Cedar City was an area called Equestrian Pointe. I contacted a realtor who told me where and when the congregation met that pertained to the Equestrian Pointe area. The next Sunday I showed up at the appointed time and place and no one was in the building. I thought this also to be luck (maybe another miracle).

The following week I showed up at the indicated time and at indicated place. I met an individual whom I

hadn't seen for 30 years and attended what I thought was the best Sunday school lesson I'd ever attended. I even called my oldest son and discussed with him some of the lesson's key points. The instructor was Shanon Brooks.

A few months later, following my family's joining me in Utah, I was invited to attend a luncheon in Cedar City sponsored by SUU and CEO Builder. At the luncheon, I was seated near Shanon Brooks. Though I didn't know his name at the time, I recognized him as the Sunday school teacher at the Equestrian Pointe congregation and introduced myself to him. Shanon introduced himself to me, explaining he worked for George Wythe College (GWC), a local liberal arts college. I had never heard of GWC. As he told me a few things about GWC's mission and approach to teaching, I readily advanced from being unfamiliar to being intrigued.

I ran into Shanon in the SUU parking lot following the luncheon and he was gracious enough to entertain a few more questions. Perhaps in an effort to escape an impromptu interrogation, Shanon was unusually gracious or sufficiently annoyed to invite me to visit the GWC campus. And rather than go straight to the Cedar City Sonic Drive-In for a well-deserved cranberry lime-aid with extra-ice as I had intended, I accepted his invitation.

Upon my arrival to GWC, Shanon took me around the campus, introducing me to students, staff, and mentors. I was struck by his use of the term "mentors" as he referred to what I would have called instructors or facilitators. I began to suspect something at GWC was different from other institutions of higher learning.

Shanon led me into a live class in which a mentor, an associate mentor, and a group of 12-15 students who were sitting around a block of tables discussing something pretty complex and thoroughly engaging. Without reluctance, almost every student was throwing out opinions, ideas, theories, positions, and quoting theorists and authors. Students appeared very well grounded (prepared) while they complimented, augmented, challenged, and clarified one another's contributions to the discussion. I saw and felt learning taking place. It seemed to me that the associate mentor had a difficult time controlling his enthusiasm for both the subject and for the opportunity to participate in- and to lead the learning process. It was remarkable.

Shanon walked me over to one of the walls in which the mission statement of GWC was written on a wooden

plaque: "*Building men and women of virtue, wisdom, diplomacy, and courage who inspire greatness in others, and move the cause of liberty.*" Plainly and simply, the intent of the statement resonated within me deeply. I was in awe. I thought, this is the contribution I want to make to my children as a father. I then thought, maybe this is what being a good citizen and an effective servant leader all is about. I asked myself: "What is this place?"

One of the students invited me to attend a class "discussion" on *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989, 2004). Although it was my intent to spend the rest of the afternoon preparing to teach an eight hour workshop on the 7 Habits for the following day, I accepted. In this workshop for which I was preparing, I cover the entire content of the book in one day. In this "discussion", we spent 3 hours discussing the first 40 pages of Covey's book. I was amazed. Again, I was thoroughly impressed by GWC's students' passion for learning, their confidence in discussing complex ideas and theories, their quoting sources from various disciplines, their willingness to evaluate new ideas and positions/insights different from their own, and their tacit understanding and commitment to helping each other to learn. I left the "discussion" impressed, even somewhat envious, as I contrasted the commitment to learning of my students with those of GWC. Shanon later told me these were college freshmen. I was astounded.

Lastly, by the time I left, I think I better understood the reason for the use of the term "mentor" rather than "instructor". The mentor leading the *7 Habits* discussion evinced a degree of commitment to the learning process exceeding even that of his students; and his comfort with and confidence in both the content and process of creating a context for learning was almost palpable. I also felt his devotion to nurturing the growth of his "mentees" on several levels, i.e., emotional, academic, and even spiritual.

I left having experienced something very special at GWC, something as spiritually fulfilling as and as intellectually satisfying as the Sunday services I attended when I first moved to Cedar City.

Thank you for such a compelling afternoon. Best wishes for continued success.

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