

Tribute to Lee Purgason 1956-2020

BY
GREG PARSONS

Greg Parsons has been on the staff of Frontier Ventures (formerly USCWM) since 1982, and currently serves as Director of Global Connections. He and his wife, Kathleen, have two children and three grandchildren.

A short while ago, after a month's long battle with cancer, good friend and fellow staff member, Lee Purgason left his earthly body. He joined the staff of the USCWM (now Frontier Ventures) in 1980. We recently honored him on his 40th anniversary.

Recruited in the exhibit hall at Urbana 1979, Lee caught the vision for the unreached, sold all he owned, drove across the country and arrived at the USCWM. In a few years he met and married Kitty, who had come from teaching English in China to join the faculty of WCIU. Early in their marriage she finished a PhD at UCLA and was teaching at WCIU and later at Biola.

Lee was trained in accounting and we desperately needed those skills, so Lee started off serving in the finance office of WCIU. He continued to use that amazing asset throughout his years on staff, in whatever department he worked. Later, he also earned a graduate degree in Organizational Leadership, which was especially helpful when he was Director of Operations.

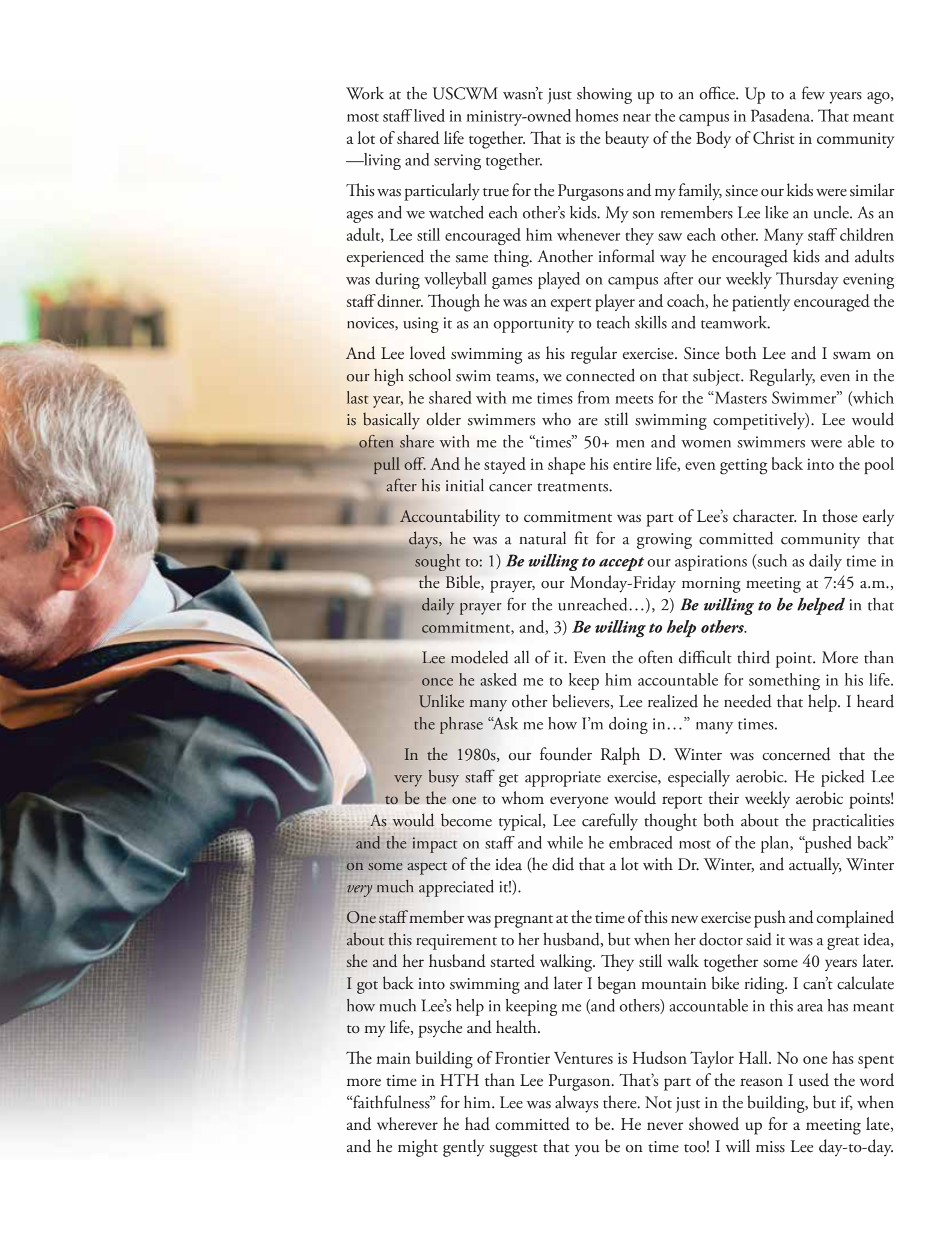
But Lee wasn't just a numbers guy. He really enjoyed people. He headed our HR department for a while, where he supervised my future daughter-in-law. He loved meeting new people and connecting with old friends. He wanted to know what you were interested in.

All of those relational and business skills were an excellent combination when Lee led the Perspectives Study Program. He was the longest serving Perspectives director – 1986-2000. Lee helped get the U.S. program on solid footing nationally and also laid the groundwork for Perspectives Global – now in more than 25 countries. Under his leadership, classes grew an average of 15% per year and the *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement Reader* was revised twice.

As the years went by and many staff came and went from Pasadena, Lee remained. Unofficially he became what he jokingly called our “institutional memory.” He was the “go to” guy for many people and many issues – be they small or large. And his giftings were especially helpful in his service on the boards of both Frontier Ventures and William Carey International University. Most recently, his financial acumen helped us manage our endowment.

Yet while he was in top leadership from the early days, he didn't mind serving in behind-the-scenes ways, such as running the sound board for meetings. Almost all of what he did served others both in Frontier Ventures and around the world.





Work at the USCWM wasn't just showing up to an office. Up to a few years ago, most staff lived in ministry-owned homes near the campus in Pasadena. That meant a lot of shared life together. That is the beauty of the Body of Christ in community—living and serving together.

This was particularly true for the Purgasons and my family, since our kids were similar ages and we watched each other's kids. My son remembers Lee like an uncle. As an adult, Lee still encouraged him whenever they saw each other. Many staff children experienced the same thing. Another informal way he encouraged kids and adults was during volleyball games played on campus after our weekly Thursday evening staff dinner. Though he was an expert player and coach, he patiently encouraged the novices, using it as an opportunity to teach skills and teamwork.

And Lee loved swimming as his regular exercise. Since both Lee and I swam on our high school swim teams, we connected on that subject. Regularly, even in the last year, he shared with me times from meets for the “Masters Swimmer” (which is basically older swimmers who are still swimming competitively). Lee would often share with me the “times” 50+ men and women swimmers were able to pull off. And he stayed in shape his entire life, even getting back into the pool after his initial cancer treatments.

Accountability to commitment was part of Lee's character. In those early days, he was a natural fit for a growing committed community that sought to: 1) ***Be willing to accept*** our aspirations (such as daily time in the Bible, prayer, our Monday-Friday morning meeting at 7:45 a.m., daily prayer for the unreached...), 2) ***Be willing to be helped*** in that commitment, and, 3) ***Be willing to help others***.

Lee modeled all of it. Even the often difficult third point. More than once he asked me to keep him accountable for something in his life. Unlike many other believers, Lee realized he needed that help. I heard the phrase “Ask me how I'm doing in...” many times.

In the 1980s, our founder Ralph D. Winter was concerned that the very busy staff get appropriate exercise, especially aerobic. He picked Lee to be the one to whom everyone would report their weekly aerobic points!

As would become typical, Lee carefully thought both about the practicalities and the impact on staff and while he embraced most of the plan, “pushed back” on some aspect of the idea (he did that a lot with Dr. Winter, and actually, Winter *very* much appreciated it!).

One staff member was pregnant at the time of this new exercise push and complained about this requirement to her husband, but when her doctor said it was a great idea, she and her husband started walking. They still walk together some 40 years later. I got back into swimming and later I began mountain bike riding. I can't calculate how much Lee's help in keeping me (and others) accountable in this area has meant to my life, psyche and health.

The main building of Frontier Ventures is Hudson Taylor Hall. No one has spent more time in HTH than Lee Purgason. That's part of the reason I used the word “faithfulness” for him. Lee was always there. Not just in the building, but if, when and wherever he had committed to be. He never showed up for a meeting late, and he might gently suggest that you be on time too! I will miss Lee day-to-day.



I will miss his distinctive stride as he walked around the courtyard of Hudson Taylor Hall.

He seemed to be doing well and responding to his treatments, so we were shocked by news of his death. Organizationally, we are groping to fill in the gaps he leaves. Lee's office had piles of paper, but it was more like a historic "dump" of his work – yet he could find exactly what he needed in those piles!

I will miss him—his cogent summaries in meetings, his sense of humor, his singing—and this will be probably be my first *MF* page in 25 years that he has not proofread!


He came to Pasadena from North Carolina 40 years ago for a reason – to see that every people group can hear about Jesus in a way they can understand. That is still in our organizational DNA. So, we fight on.

While he isn't yet in the new heavens and earth described in Revelation 21-22, I can see him strutting along streets of gold both calculating how much it is worth and stopping to talk with everyone in his path.

Rev. 21:4 – He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

Rev 22:4-5 – They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

Because of Lee's service to WCIU, including being a board member since 1990, the University has established a student scholarship in his and Kitty's honor (Kitty taught there and was also on the board briefly). See <https://www.wciu.edu/partner>. Or, you can give a scholarship for students to attend the next Urbana (urbana.org).

Lee was always involved in his home church missions team, and they have set up a link for giving at: <https://pascov.breezechms.com/give/online> where there is a drop down menu "in memory of Lee." 



Well done, good and faithful servant!