

Tony Abbott

Mayor Knox, other elected officials, past and present, previous recipients, guests, citizens, and town staff, it is my honor to tell you a little about Tony Abbott, this year's recipient of the G. Jackson Burney Community Service Award.

Many admirers across our state and country know Tony through his profoundly beautiful poetry and his acclaimed novels. The state accorded him the North Carolina Award in 2015, the state's highest civilian honor, saying, in part, "In addition to mentoring Davidson students, he has dedicated himself to the community of writers in the Tar Heel state by presenting frequent readings of his work, attending readings of other writers, and serving leadership roles with writers' organizations. Abbott is past president of the Charlotte Writers Club and the North Carolina Writers Network, and also past chair of the North Carolina Writers Conference. He has won the Thomas H. McDill Award of the North Carolina Poetry Society three times. In 1996 he was honored by St. Andrews College with the Sam Ragan Award for his writing and his service to the literary community of North Carolina."

So, yes, our very own Tony is well known outside of our small town. And we townies respect him for those many contributions to the life of the mind in North Carolina.

However, we honor him today for all that he has meant to his home town, through his good works and his life generously and faithfully lived among us.

Tony, and his wife, Susan, herself a recipient of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award given by Davidson College for community service, moved to Davidson in 1964. Tony had never lived in the south before that, and he came here with some trepidation. How would he fit in? Would he like it? Would we like him? Of course, 54 years later, we know the answers to those questions.

Before he found Davidson, Tony moved around a good bit in his young life, having been born in San Francisco. He and his sister moved with his mother to New York, where they lived with his grandparents for a time. They moved next to Connecticut. When Tony was in the third grade, he went to the Fay School, a boarding school in Massachusetts, near Boston. It was there that he discovered a native interest in religion. Even though his family did not attend church regularly, he asked for a Bible for his ninth birthday, which he still has to this day.

At fourteen, Tony attended high school at the Kent School, an Episcopalian school in Connecticut. He remembers his teachers fondly from that time. In fact, his favorite people were his teachers, especially his English teachers, and he grew to realize that he wanted to become a teacher himself. He admired his teachers' intellect, and even more, their values. His own belief system was developed under their watchful and supportive eyes.

As a college freshman, he studied on scholarship at an English boarding school, and he broadened his horizons traveling throughout Europe with other exchange students. He entered Princeton as a sophomore and quickly volunteered to teach a children's class in Sunday School at an Episcopal Mission Church, the beginning of now half a century of teaching Sunday School. He met and married Susan when he was in graduate school at Harvard, and her fun-loving family became his family. And even while earning his PhD, he made time to teach Sunday School at an Episcopal Church in Cambridge.

After a brief time, teaching at Bates College in Maine, he and Susan moved to Davidson. John Kelton, himself a recipient of the Burney Award, told Tony about a new Sunday School class at Davidson College Presbyterian Church, called the Covenant Class. Tony couldn't resist the thought of developing a new kind of adult curriculum and, within a year, became a teacher and class leader, a post he still holds 54 years later. Eventually, he and Susan and their children joined DCPC.

Tony's work at the college and the church did not keep him from working on important town issues. He was appointed by Mayor Sadler to be a member of the Community Relations Committee – formed to improve race relations in town. He served on that committee for many years and worked particularly with Annie Mildred Lowery and James Raeford in the 60s and 70s. For him, race relations had to do with his understanding of religion. It was a pretty simple formula for him: Jesus said that God loved everybody, and everybody was sacred to God, so racism was contrary to his religious beliefs.

The committee visited every church in Davidson and talked to people. There were eight churches at that time – one Episcopal, two Baptist, two Methodist, and three Presbyterian. Five of those eight were attended by predominantly white people and three by predominantly black people. Tony, eventually the chair of the group, and his committee talked to all of them to find out what people were feeling about how they were treated in town. He found it to be an eye-opening experience. Among other initiatives, they worked with the owners of a local coffee shop for them to agree to have only one entrance, to be used by all citizens.

Through a local pastor and social worker, Tony became involved in the prison ministry at the Huntersville Prison, a minimum-security facility, no longer in existence. He agreed to meet an inmate named Vernon Rich, who was identified as having writing talent. Tony worked with Vernon and became his community sponsor, with permission to bring Vernon to Davidson on occasional weekends. Together, they wrote an award-winning column for the Mecklenburg Gazette about prison life and other social issues. Tony drew him out by asking questions that Vernon would answer in writing. They became more than sponsor and inmate. They became friends. During the many ups and downs of Vernon's incarceration, some of which took him out of minimum security and back to Central Prison in Raleigh, they stayed friends. Once, when Tony visited Vernon in Central Prison, Vernon told Tony that he was afraid that Tony would stop being his friend, and Tony assured him that he was his friend for life. When Vernon was released from prison, he immediately returned to home and family in Iowa. Once when Tony was at a conference in Chicago, Vernon even drove there to see him. Upon Vernon's death, only a few years ago, Tony received a copy of his obituary and was comforted to know that Vernon had sustained a good life in Iowa.

Tony was also a dedicated member of the Davidson Community Players. As a volunteer, he directed nine plays for them, making a significant contribution to the creative life of the town. Among the plays he directed were "The Miracle Worker" and "Inherit the Wind," both of which took on important issues of the day. In "Inherit the Wind," he had different community members, not actors, play the jury, and in this way, involved more and more people in the success of the Community Players.

When he retired from Davidson College, Tony became a Red Cross driver, a job he has loved for over 15 years. He gets to know people from all walks of life and of all ages, as he drives them to doctors' appointments or for treatments. He finds this a rewarding and meaningful way to stay involved in the town.

Somehow, in the midst all of his volunteering and teaching and researching and raising a family, Tony has been a prolific and honored writer. During a sabbatical to Australia in 1978 with Susan and their children, Tony wrote a first draft of a novel. "Leaving Maggie Hope" was finally published to great acclaim in 2003. He has published two novels, two academic books, and a total of seven books of poetry, one of which was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, all while mentoring writers.

One such student had this to say about Tony, "He quickly became a favorite professor and lifelong mentor...because of Tony, I went on to become a professor myself."

Another recipient of Tony's mentorship said, "I arrived in Davidson disoriented and lonely. I discovered a special Sunday School class with a special teacher. There was real intellectual life in that class and probing questions were not frowned upon but encouraged and supported. A sense of peace washed over me, and a gray veil began to lift. Maybe I could find happiness in this quirky place, find a way to belong, find my footing. This compassionate and intuitive teacher gave me my first glimpse of that possibility. Thank you, teacher."

When DavidsonLearns was begun, its board turned to Tony to see if he would offer a class on writing poetry, essentially as a volunteer. The class filled up within hours. His adult learners respond to him by making themselves into writers' groups, returning to his classes, and publishing poetry of their own. Tony is teaching for DavidsonLearns again this fall, and he is teaching the Covenant class, both of which he calls a "great joy."

Tony will tell you that these experiences have given him more than he has received. He has learned that it is important to do what you love to do because it is what keeps you alive. People tell him to take it easy and rest, but he wants to lead a life of purpose and for him, teaching and volunteering are an important part of that purpose, from book clubs to DavidsonLearns, churches, the Red Cross, and the town, Tony wants to do it.

And for that, we say, thank you, Tony! Thank you for being our friend for life. Thank you for finding your way down south, for making Davidson your home, for giving of yourself and your talents so freely, for loving us and showing us that in hundreds of ways. We love you back. And we are so happy that you are this year's recipient of the G. Jackson Burney Community Service Award.