2008 Alumni Stars

Virginia Commonwealth University
Virginia Commonwealth University’s Alumni Stars program, sponsored by the VCU Alumni Association and the MCV Alumni Association of VCU, annually recognizes outstanding graduates. Honorees are selected through faculty recommendations and alumni committees from across the university for their achievements and contributions in the following areas:

**Humanitarian achievement**
*Notable distinction at the national or international level that reflects positively on VCU*

★

**Professional achievement**
*Notable distinction in his or her profession*

★

**Community service**
*Exceptional community volunteer or professional service that made a difference in the well-being of others*

★

**University service**
*Outstanding service and support on behalf of VCU*
2008 Alumni Stars

Golden H. Bethune-Hill
School of Nursing

Mark A. Crabtree
School of Dentistry

John E. Cragin
School of Social Work

Donwan T. Harrell
School of the Arts

Sheila Hill-Christian
College of Humanities and Sciences

Steven Offenbacher
School of Medicine, Basic Health Sciences

Mary E. Perkinson
School of Engineering

Jonathan B. Perlin
School of Medicine

Mark I. Raper
School of Mass Communications

Catherine P. Saunders
School of Allied Health Professions

Thomas A. Silvestri
School of Business

Patricia W. Slattum
School of Pharmacy

Robert J. Wittman
L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs

Patricia I. Wright
School of Education
Golden H. Bethune-Hill

1985 Master of Science ★ School of Nursing
School of Nursing – Professional Achievement

Golden H. Bethune-Hill learned at an early age that education is essential to succeed. “My mother was an education fanatic,” Bethune-Hill says. “She was valedictorian of her high school class. She did not attend college herself, but she made sure my sister and I did.”

Bethune-Hill earned her bachelor’s degree in nursing from North Carolina A&T State University and her master’s degree in nursing administration from Virginia Commonwealth University. To further her education, she became a Certified Nurse Administrator in 1999 and graduated from the prestigious Wharton Fellows Program in Nurse Management at the University of Pennsylvania in 2000. While at Wharton, Bethune-Hill gained an overall understanding of health care, as well as in-depth knowledge of what can affect it. She was thrilled to soak up all she could from the three-week, invitation-only program. “I never stop learning,” she says. “I don’t think you can ever learn enough.”

At VCU, Bethune-Hill worked full time while studying for her master’s degree. She credits the VCU faculty with building on her experience base and providing a curriculum that enabled her to develop strong working relationships with her colleagues.

“Education gave me the broader picture,” Bethune-Hill says. “I understood health care better. It was the extra push from my master’s program that made my career soar.”

Throughout her 35-year career, Bethune-Hill has indeed risen through the ranks of the health care profession. She served as the president of the New Jersey Board of Nursing and as president of the Organization of Nurse Executives in New Jersey. Bethune-Hill moved on to become senior vice president of patient care services at Centra Health Care in Lynchburg, Va., and led the organization to Magnet status, nursing’s highest recognition for excellence in patient care and nursing.

In 2006, Bethune-Hill accepted the position of executive vice president and administrator of Riverside Regional Medical Center in Newport News, Va., becoming the highest-ranking black woman in the Riverside Hospital system’s history. As executive vice president of the hospital system, she collaborates with the CEO and four other executive vice presidents. As administrator at Riverside Regional, Bethune-Hill is responsible for the direction of the hospital’s leadership, including that of many of its departments and staff members. One of her duties is organizing nursing leadership within the system.

Known as a visionary who works to advance nursing and health care, Bethune-Hill has received numerous honors for her dedication and service, including the New Jersey Governor’s Award for Excellence in Administration and the Distinguished Service Award from the New Jersey State Board of Nursing. In 2004 and 2005, the Lynchburg community recognized her initiative by honoring her with the Most Influential Leader Award.

“I have a passion for excellence,” Bethune-Hill says. “I am extremely driven, partly because of my mother, who instilled in me that I could do anything in the world.”

Bethune-Hill is married to Charlie W. Hill, who, she says, shares her drive and commitment to excellence in his role as executive vice president of Landmark Communications Inc. Together, they have seven adult children.
While enrolled at Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Dentistry, Mark A. Crabtree developed a passion for public service and devoted a considerable amount of time to serving in student organizations. As the student representative on the Department of Periodontics Promotion and Tenure Committee and president of his dental school class as a junior, he got a firsthand understanding of university issues. However it was as president of the MCV Campus Student Government Association that Crabtree learned the most. “I think my experience as president of the MCV Campus SGA paved the way for my involvement in public affairs in my community,” he says. That experience served Crabtree well after he graduated from VCU and “I had the opportunity to deal with those very same problems,” he says. In addition to a thriving private practice in Martinsville, Va., Crabtree became involved in local government as a city councilman in 1994, vice mayor in 1996 and mayor in 1998, a position he held until 2002.

At the same time, he was appointed to the Virginia Board of Health Professions and the Virginia Board of Dentistry by former Gov. George Allen in 1994. As a member of the dentistry board, Crabtree “pushed to reform our regulations to make them easier to understand and be as little of a burden on the practitioner as possible,” he says. He also acted as councilor and president of the Virginia Dental Association.

In 1998, former Gov. Jim Gilmore appointed Crabtree to the Longwood College board of visitors. He also served on the board of visitors at his alma mater, Wake Forest University, and as commissioner of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. He currently serves as an American Dental Association delegate and member of the association’s Council on Access, Prevention and Interprofessional Relations.

Crabtree believes his dentistry education set him on the course to a dual career. “I am very grateful for the skills the MCV School of Dentistry taught me,” he says. “I was very well prepared for private practice and developed other leadership skills that prepared me for a life of public service outside my dental practice.”

Among Crabtree’s most recent public service projects has been the formation of a private-public partnership to address the needs of low-income individuals in Martinsville. The partnership created the Piedmont Virginia Dental Health Foundation, which established the Community Dental Clinic preceptorship program in September 2006. The clinic is staffed by four VCU dental students and one VCU dental hygiene student who arrive every other week as part of their clinical requirement. “The need is tremendous,” Crabtree says of the services the clinic offers.

John Whittrock, D.D.S., one of Crabtree’s professors at VCU, once told him that dental education should train students for mastery of the discipline, not just minimal competency. It is a statement that rings especially true to Crabtree. “I believe MCV did that for me and I believe we should all work to master the art of our profession,” he says. “We are blessed to be able to serve the people in our communities and should use all of our God-given talents to the best of our ability.”
After serving in rural Georgia with Volunteers in Service to America — today part of AmeriCorps — John E. Cragin enrolled at Virginia Commonwealth University to earn his Master of Social Work. The expertise and commitment of his instructors immediately had an impact on him.

“I was impressed to be around faculty members who shared my values,” Cragin says, “but also demonstrated the benefit of expert knowledge on being able to have a greater impact on working toward the social good.”

After earning his master’s, Cragin’s career path led him to various positions in social work. He served in community mental health centers in North Carolina and Massachusetts for several years before earning a Master of Business Administration degree from Boston University. Cragin put his two degrees to work in administrative roles at social service and public health programs in Boston, and eventually joined Boston Medical Center where he managed grant writing for the hospital and the city’s health department.

In 2000, Cragin wrote a federal grant application with the goal of developing a data-driven case for transforming a public health access program into a managed care program for the uninsured. The Boston Medical Center CareNet Plan was touted by then Gov. Mitt Romney as a model for improving care and controlling costs for the uninsured. Today, Cragin runs the state’s largest and only statewide Commonwealth Care program, a state-subsidized insurance program for the previously uninsured. The program now has more than 75,000 members.

Whether volunteering with the public or working in the private sector, Cragin lives by the core social work values he’s learned. “My two guiding principles are basic social work tenets: genuine respect for others and start where your client is at, whether the client is an individual or group, organization or a larger political entity,” he says.

Cragin recalls his first class at the VCU School of Social Work when he and his classmates had to write a short definition of mental health and discuss what they wrote. After the exercise, professor Martin Schwartz, Ed.D., read Freud’s definition — “the ability to love well and work well.” That long-ago lesson stayed with Cragin and continues to influence him today.

“I have pretty much been spending the rest of my life trying to balance the two,” he says, “and am awed by the immense challenge of trying to do both well.”

Cragin and his wife Marilyn reside in Brookline, Mass., where they are active supporters of a number of social, health, educational and arts organizations dedicated to making a difference in their community.
Donwan T. Harrell

1992 Bachelor of Fine Arts ★ School of the Arts
School of the Arts – Professional Achievement

Donwan T. Harrell is proof that a strong work ethic, dedication and vision can get you far. The self-proclaimed “worst sewer in his class,” Harrell has managed to flourish in the fashion industry. As the president and creative director of his own multimillion-dollar fashion conglomerate, Kemistre 8, Harrell oversees several successful brands including Akademiks.

With a seamstress mother and carpenter father, Harrell grew up knowing the meaning of hard work. His mother taught him to wield a needle and thread when he was a young boy.

Harrell’s career in fashion took off when he was a sophomore at Virginia Commonwealth University. He entered the International Air France Student Fashion Designer Competition and won the top prize of studying at the Chambre Syndicale in France for the next two years.

“Winning the competition was the most memorable experience of my college career,” he says. “It prepared me not only as a fashion designer but also as a businessman.”

After graduating from VCU, Harrell moved to New York where he landed a job with designer Robert Stock. A few years later, he was recruited by Donna Karan to design suits. Next up was a position with sportswear giant, Nike, where Harrell expanded his skills by creating designs on the computer.

After just one year at Nike, Harrell was promoted and relocated to Hong Kong to study the Asian market and design activewear. After nearly five years traveling throughout the region, he returned to the U.S. to start his own business.

The concept for Akademiks originated from the idea that “urban or minority kids didn’t really dress different than anybody else,” says Harrell. “They just wanted to wear their clothes bigger. The mentality was to simply change the spec.”

Together with his brother, Emmett, Harrell has consistently developed successful brands that appeal to different audiences. Akademiks caters to the hip-hop crowd. PRPS jeans are worn by professional athletes, actors and rock stars and sell at high-end stores such as Bergdorf Goodman and Fred Segal. Stash House is geared toward street and skate culture.

With his business thriving, Harrell is often asked for guidance from up-and-coming designers. His advice is simple: “Learn how to use the computer. Learn Illustrator and Photoshop,” he says. “Learn about fabrications and pay attention in math class.” But of course it takes more than that to succeed. “If you have a dream or desire, keep working at it,” he says.

Harrell feels fortunate for the encouragement his VCU professors gave him. “I look upon my education at VCU fondly. I have pleasant memories of my teachers, especially Henry Swartz and Sondra Wilkins. They were a huge support system to me.”

The support of VCU faculty and a growing sense of independence, along with a heavy dose of talent, vision and drive primed Harrell for the fast-paced, competitive, exciting world of fashion.

“Dealing with schedules, classes, different personalities, assignments and competitions all prepared me for life after college,” Harrell says. “I wouldn’t trade my experiences for anything in this world.”
Sheila Hill-Christian developed a strong bond with Richmond, Va., as an undergraduate at Virginia Commonwealth University. After earning her bachelor’s degree, she remained in the area and has dedicated her career to improving the lives of people in the Richmond community.

A popular leader in every position she’s held, Hill-Christian previously headed the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice under former Gov. George Allen, and was the executive director of the Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, the chief operating officer for the GRTC Transit System and the executive director of the Virginia Lottery under Gov. Tim Kaine. Known for her experience and no-nonsense manner, Hill-Christian embodies the definition of a mover and shaker.

“I believe that my personal approach in terms of always maintaining my integrity resulted in these appointments,” she says. “I enjoy change, choosing for whom I work, learning new work environments and ‘correcting’ stagnant situations in challenging environments.”

Coming from a family of public servants — including a father who was a fireman and a mother who worked in parks and recreation — it’s only natural that Hill-Christian gravitated toward a career in public service. Today, as the chief administrative officer for the city of Richmond, she handles the day-to-day management of the city’s departments and agencies, including public works, public health, libraries, parks and recreation, and the police and fire departments. It is a position that thrills and motivates her.

“The work of city employees affects the citizens of Richmond every day in ways they often take for granted,” Hill-Christian says. “Every time water comes out of their sinks, traffic lights change, a police officer or firefighter arrives on scene, a pothole gets repaired or trash gets collected, a city employee made it happen.”

It was when Hill-Christian moved to Richmond in the mid-1970s to attend VCU that she gained an appreciation for what it takes to make a city run — a diverse group of organizations and individuals dedicated to enhancing the quality of life of the city’s inhabitants.

In addition, her studies at VCU opened her eyes to the possibilities for her future. As an African-American product of 1960s and 1970s public education in Virginia, Hill-Christian says, “There was little to no information available about the true contributions of African-Americans and the ‘other side’ of history in America and Europe.

“What I learned in my history, foreign language and political science classes at VCU contributed to a feeling of empowerment and determination that has stayed with me,” Hill-Christian says. “VCU provided a foundation that encouraged my interest in learning and fostered an open-minded approach that has served me well in my career.”
“Education made me fearless,” Steven Offenbacher says. More than 30 years after graduating, as a renowned researcher and lecturer, he remains so.

Back in the late 1970s, Offenbacher was just embarking on his career in oral health research as a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University. It was a busy time. He attended classes all day, worked in the lab at nights and had a job as a local musician on the weekends.

Despite his packed schedule, Offenbacher thrived on the MCV Campus and says his education was the basic foundation that led him to become a translational research scientist. “Dental training and my Ph.D. work in biochemistry gave me the perfect combination to pursue a post-doc in pharmacology and specialty training,” he says. “This has enabled me to enjoy a diverse career that involves discovering new mechanisms of disease pathogenesis, developing new drugs to treat patients and doing clinical trials to ultimately improve patient care.”

VCU’s graduate program taught Offenbacher to be an analytical thinker and to recognize and focus on the important fundamental processes involved in any clinical problem. “I learned that the next step in scientific discovery was to ask and answer the important question — not necessarily the most convenient question,” he says. “My education gave me the basic tools to develop new methods where none existed and to push the technology to focus on what is important to advance the science.”

“My education at MCV was more than training. It was an enlightenment that has enabled me to make a contribution that has not only increased our knowledge but that has translated into better health care.”

Today, Offenbacher is a professor in the Department of Periodontics at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry and director of the Center for Oral and Systemic Diseases. He and a colleague, James Beck, Ph.D., founded the center more than 10 years ago. The internationally recognized center is a leading research organization and was the first to discover that periodontal disease is a risk factor for pregnancy complications in humans. As a result of the work in this field, U.S. insurance companies have extended dental benefits in the last few years.

“It is gratifying as a scientist to see research that is actually translated into better patient care,” Offenbacher says.

Aside from his research, Offenbacher continues to treat patients and teach. He has been lauded for his work, receiving the 2006 Norton M. Ross Award for Excellence in Clinical Research and the Special Impact Award from the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies Coalition for his research that links oral health and pre-term, low-birth-weight babies. He has twice given testimony to Congress in support of oral health research.

The course of Offenbacher’s successful career can be traced back to his time at VCU. “My education at MCV was more than training,” he says. “It was an enlightenment that has enabled me to make a contribution that has not only increased our knowledge but that has translated into better health care.”
Immediately upon graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Engineering, Mary E. Perkinson landed a job as an engineer with Northrop Grumman, a global defense and technology company providing aerospace systems and shipbuilding to government and commercial customers, in Newport News, Va. She quickly proved herself.

In 2005, Perkinson received the Model of Excellence Award from Northrop Grumman for her leadership, quality, integrity and customer supplier satisfaction in the New Hire Community of Practice in 2004. The New Hire CoP, a volunteer organization within the company, works to improve retention and provide a more supportive environment for entry-level employees.

Imparting her knowledge to others is a natural instinct for Perkinson. She believes success comes from continuous learning and professional development. Perkinson, a value stream leader in crane engineering at Northrop Grumman, enthusiastically seeks out mentors in her profession and within the community to guide her development. She is constantly learning and networking through the professional and volunteer organizations with which she works.

Perkinson believes strongly in giving back to her profession and often volunteers with young women interested in an engineering career. She also donates her time to the FIRST Robotics Competition regional event and received the Outstanding Volunteer Award in 2003.

Not easily discouraged, Perkinson works hard to impress that positive attitude upon the students she mentors. “If someone tells you ‘no’ when you are asking for something you feel passionate about, it just means you need to work harder and keep on trying,” she says.

That message became clear to Perkinson at VCU, when she asked why the School of Engineering did not have a machine shop so that students could have hands-on experience in fabrication. Told at first that the school did not need a machine shop, Perkinson, other students and faculty worked together to bring one to the school before she graduated.

Since then, “Don’t always take no for a final answer” has become Perkinson’s life lesson.

Now as a successful member of the working world, Perkinson appreciates the fact that the engineering curriculum at VCU puts a heavy emphasis on business. “Having a strong understanding of how to write a business case to back up your ideas can make the difference between obtaining funding and not even being considered,” she says.

As an active member of the VCU School of Engineering Alumni Board of Directors, Perkinson is eager to see what innovative opportunities come from the collaboration between the schools of Engineering and Business. The two schools share a new four-story, state-of-the-art facility, part of the Monroe Park Campus Addition, which offers students access to high-tech labs and common areas for brainstorming and problem solving.

“I’m excited about the strong relationship between the School of Engineering and the School of Business because it gives our graduates a competitive edge,” she says.
Jonathan B. Perlin has spent his entire career ensuring that people receive quality health care.

As chief medical officer and president of the clinical services group of Hospital Corporation of America, he is responsible for clinical strategy and continually improving performance at HCA’s 338 facilities that provide care for one in every 20 major hospitalizations in the U.S.

As a medical student at Virginia Commonwealth University’s School of Medicine, Perlin learned firsthand how to improve patient care. His first patient in his “Introduction to Clinical Medicine” course was a heart transplant recipient who smoked. Perlin expressed concern about the availability of tobacco on a medical campus and spoke to the dean. The dean advised Perlin to take on the issue. Perlin worked with other students and faculty to make the MCV Campus smoke-free. “I was a troublemaker even then,” he says, “but it was a great object lesson in how policy can affect health outcomes at a broader level than the individual patient.”

When Perlin found himself getting caught up in the negativity toward managed care, two faculty members, Richard Wenzel, M.D., M.Sc., and Sheldon Retchin, M.D., M.S.P.H., encouraged him to “stop complaining” and get educated. Perlin earned his Master of Science degree in health administration during his chief residency and while he was a junior faculty member. He credits Wenzel, Retchin and the faculty of the Department of Health Administration for helping him achieve his career goals in improving health care. “Their counsel, support and friendship, then as now, have been the foundation of any successes I’ve had,” Perlin says.

At HCA, Perlin is involved with developing and implementing electronic health records and introduced an internationally recognized program for combating MRSA, a “superbug” infection. Before joining HCA in 2006, he was undersecretary for health in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, where he oversaw the care of more than 5.4 million patients annually by more than 200,000 health care professionals at 1,400 sites with an overall budget of more than $34 billion. For implementing the nation’s best electronic health records and improving care for veterans, Perlin was recognized with an Innovations in American Government Award from the Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government’s Ash Institute.

Perlin has served on numerous boards and commissions including the National Quality Forum, the Joint Commission and American Health Information Community. A Fellow of the American College of Physicians and the American College of Medical Informatics, he has been published widely.

“I feel unbelievably privileged to have had the opportunities that I’ve had. I know that the doors to those opportunities were created by the educational experiences at VCU.”
For more than 25 years, Mark I. Raper has balanced a life of professional accomplishments and community service. Success in the workplace came quickly.

Raper credits his hands-on Virginia Commonwealth University education with helping him land his first job. “I was able to do real work for outside organizations while a student at VCU,” he says. “This allowed me to step right into a manager's position within the public relations industry after graduation.”

Hired as director of marketing for Sentara Health Services, Raper was a member of the communications team for the birth of the first in vitro baby born in the U.S.

Several VCU faculty members, including David Manning White, Ph.D., and Dulcie Straughan, Ph.D., inspired Raper. These teachers were dedicated to their students and demonstrated the practical side of public relations in the “real world.” Raper’s education primed him for his career in public relations.

“I appreciate the encouragement and the preparation I received from VCU,” Raper says. “I graduated knowing that ‘If I wanted it, it was within reach.’”

Today, Raper is the chairman and CEO of CRT/tanaka, one of the largest and most decorated independent public relations firms in the country. The company has twice been named the “Best PR Agency to Work for in America” by The Holmes Report, a leading public relations trade publication, and twice been a finalist for PRWeek magazine’s “Mid-Size Agency of the Year.”

Raper remains an enthusiastic supporter of his alma mater and keeps close ties to VCU by serving on the School of Mass Communications Advisory Board.

“Now, VCU has become an even more remarkable beacon for the Richmond region and beyond,” he says. “The mass communications school and other schools have improved dramatically. I am a better person for my association with VCU, but I am only one of thousands who feel the same way.”

For his contributions to the public relations industry, Raper has received many honors, including the 2007 Thomas Jefferson Award of Excellence in Public Relations, given by the Richmond Chapter of the Public Relations Society of America. In April 2008, Raper was inducted into the Virginia Communications Hall of Fame, an event hosted by the VCU School of Mass Communications.

Raper makes time outside of work to serve on the planning committee of the Council of Public Relations Firms and on the board of directors of the Coalition for a Greater Richmond. He is past president of the Arts Council of Richmond and also served on the boards for Noah’s Children pediatric hospice, Richmond Urban Partnership for Educational Success, The Carpenter Center for the Performing Arts and the Ginter Park Recreational Association.

“I’ve been blessed beyond anything I deserve,” Raper says. “Fulfillment is a common dream. And individual fulfillment is a responsibility that we all — including corporate America — must address in order to engage people and maximize success.”
Catherine P. Saunders

1982 Master of Science ★ School of Allied Health Professions
1976 Bachelor of Social Work ★ School of Social Work

School of Allied Health Professions – Professional Achievement/University Service

Catherine P. Saunders may be the only real estate agent in the Richmond, Va., area who also is a professional gerontologist. The unlikely combination is a perfect fit for her. “A portion of my business is devoted to working with older persons and their families,” she says. Saunders helps the elderly identify and locate the best housing situation for their needs. At the same time, she works to promote gerontology-related issues in the real estate community by assisting other agents who are working with individuals with Alzheimer’s disease. It may be a niche market, but it is a necessary one. “The changing demographics of our society illustrate the need for Realtors who are prepared to better serve the increasing older population,” Saunders says.

In 1972, Saunders entered Virginia Commonwealth University as a social work major. It was in 1979, when she began her gerontology studies, that her talent for multitasking surfaced. She took classes part time while working full time with the elderly, still graduating with a 4.0 GPA.

Dedication to serving the community was instilled in her while attending VCU. “The diversity of the urban university experience as a student led me to be involved in the community and clearly illustrated the mutual benefit of this service to me,” Saunders says.

Over the years, Saunders has been involved in numerous organizations, including serving on the board of the Richmond Association of Realtors, as well as holding positions of past president of the Greater Richmond Alzheimer’s Association, vice chair of the Virginia Alzheimer’s Commission and president of the board of Circle Center Adult Day Services. “I strive to give back the wealth the university has given me,” she says.

At the same time, this past president and lifetime member of the MCV Alumni Association of VCU has worked as a “cheerleader” for the university and the School of Allied Health Professions. Saunders offers information to faculty applicants as they consider employment at VCU and helps them navigate the housing market in the Greater Richmond area. Through her employer, Long and Foster Realtors, she has provided the phones — including the cost of long-distance calls — and related facilities to host the School of Allied Health Professions’ annual phone campaign for the past three years.

For her professional and community service efforts, Saunders has received multiple awards, including the 1986 Gerontology Distinguished Alumni of the Year, the A. Kenton Muhleman Award (Rookie of the Year) and the Adrienne Bendheim Award (Outstanding Salesperson of the Year), both from the Richmond Association of Realtors, which recognize the combination of excellence in real estate, commitment to continuing education and community service.

“My accomplishments could not have been possible without the education and experiences I obtained at VCU,” Saunders says. “VCU has been an extremely influential aspect of my life. I am honored to be affiliated with a state, national and world leader and delighted to have the opportunity to continue to interact with the university.”
“Unbelievable” is how Thomas A. Silvestri describes his path from copy editor to publisher of the Richmond Times-Dispatch. “It was totally unexpected,” he says of his career track at the paper. “It’s a great job because it combines business leadership with intense community involvement.”

A 1986 M.B.A. graduate, Silvestri earned his Virginia Commonwealth University degree while working full time. “For more than five years, I was either working or going to school every day,” he says. “That test of determination made receiving the VCU M.B.A. that much more special.”

While working and taking classes, Silvestri knew he had support available if he needed it. Management professor Wally Johnston, D.B.A., was a mentor who helped Silvestri think through various new jobs and challenges. “Dr. Johnston had an uncanny knack for ‘showing up’ when I was at a crossroads,” Silvestri says. “He poignantly summarized my situations and pushed me to be clear on next steps. His storytelling helped me understand the context of business issues, as well as the political risks, that abound as you move up in an organization.”

The relationship with Johnston continued even after Silvestri left the university. “He represented all that’s right about VCU — classroom exchanges turning into professional mentorship and then becoming a longtime friendship.” When Johnston passed away in May 2007, Silvestri joined his fellow alumni in raising funds to name one of the team breakout rooms in Snead Hall in Johnston’s memory.

The experience Silvestri gained at VCU comes into play daily as publisher of Richmond’s primary newspaper. “I am a determined leader thanks, in part, to the lessons learned at VCU, which delivered knowledge that inspired vision, informed decision-making, teamwork and quality results.”

An avid champion for the community and VCU, Silvestri recently finished a two-year stint as president of the VCU School of Business Alumni Board, and later this year, he will become chairman of Leadership Metro Richmond.

Professionally, Silvestri has been involved in numerous organizations, including serving as a board member for the Greater Richmond Chamber of Commerce, the World Affairs Council of Richmond, VCU Alumni Association Board, American Press Institute and the University of Richmond Robins School of Business Advisory Board. Personally, he credits his wife, Sue Kurzman, for being a strong sounding board, as well as always providing outstanding support, counsel and encouragement.

With all of his success, Silvestri considers his VCU education a career highlight. “Earning an M.B.A. from VCU is definitely one of the best achievements in my life,” he says. “Every time I drive by the campus, I say ‘thank you!’”
Patricia W. Slattum

1992 Doctor of Pharmacy and Doctor of Philosophy ★ School of Pharmacy
1992 Certificate in Aging Studies ★ Department of Gerontology
1985 Bachelor of Science ★ School of Pharmacy
School of Pharmacy – Community Service/University Service

Patricia W. Slattum always had close relationships with older adults in her family. She didn’t think too much about it until she worked as a teaching assistant in the pharmacy skills lab as part of her graduate work in the Virginia Commonwealth University School of Pharmacy. Slattum’s lab instructor was working on her degree in gerontology and was passionate about the subject. “I decided to take a course in gerontology to learn more about it,” Slattum says. “I began to feel that I had found my true calling!”

As the third graduate of the VCU School of Pharmacy’s unique combined degree program, Slattum served as a bridge between practice and science by engaging in professional and graduate education at the same time. She credits faculty members who graduated from similar degree programs with helping her reach her goals. “The faculty in the Department of Gerontology helped me see how caring for the elderly could fit into my other professional interests,” Slattum says.

In 1999, Slattum returned to the MCV Campus as a full-time faculty member. One of the main reasons was to join the new Geriatric Pharmacotherapy Program in the School of Pharmacy. “With the aging of our population and the increasing use of medications to manage chronic health conditions, there is a great need for health professionals with expertise in aging,” she says.

Slattum, who remains committed to the combined degree programs, works with the program’s students while doing research. She primarily studies the effect of medications on cognitive functioning in older adults, particularly medications that may worsen memory.

Slattum’s work has earned her the highest accolades. In 2008, the American Society for Clinical Pharmacology and Therapeutics honored her with the William B. Abrams Award in Geriatric Clinical Pharmacology for her outstanding contributions to the field.

In VCU’s Geriatric Pharmacotherapy Program, Slattum has had the opportunity to work with other faculty to increase the geriatric content in the curriculum and mentor students for careers in geriatric pharmacy. She was the co-adviser for the first doctoral graduate of the VCU School of Pharmacy pharmacotherapy track. For her efforts, Slattum was selected as the 2005 Teacher of the Year in the School of Pharmacy and the 2005 Outstanding Gerontology Educator by the Virginia Association on Aging.

At the community level, Slattum also lends her expertise to organizations such as the Alzheimer’s Association, the Area Agency on Aging and state agencies.

Slattum attributes much of her success to her VCU experience, which helped clarify her chosen profession. “VCU and MCV provided me with an outstanding foundation as a student and an excellent work environment as a professional to realize my potential and make a difference in my community,” Slattum says. “I am fortunate to have been surrounded by great colleagues in many different disciplines who are committed to improving the lives of some of our most vulnerable citizens.”
alumnus Rob Wittman expected his life to change after being elected to represent voters in Virginia’s 1st Congressional District. But it didn’t occur to him how quickly those changes would come.

Wittman, a Republican from Montross, was on his cell phone talking to his wife the morning after winning the Dec. 11, 2007, special election when a call came in from an unlisted number.

“I said, ‘Sweetheart, I’d better take this call,’ and when I picked up, the woman at the other end of the line said, ‘This is the Oval Office — stand by for a call from the president,’” Wittman says. “He was very cordial and very down-to-earth and he congratulated me on my win.”

Less than a week later, the newly elected congressman and President George W. Bush shared a brief conversation when Bush visited the district to address a Rotary Club.

“It was even more exciting to talk to him in person,” says Wittman who earned a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Administration from VCU in 2002.

A marine scientist, Wittman has spent more than 20 years working for the state government, most recently as field director for the Virginia Health Department’s Division of Shellfish Sanitation. Earlier, he worked for many years as an environmental health specialist for local health departments in Virginia’s Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula areas.

While representing voters at the national level is a new challenge for Wittman, he’s no stranger to public service. He won his first campaign for office in 1986 when he was elected to Montross Town Council. He served there for 10 years, including four years as mayor. During his tenure, he helped build a municipal sewer system and developed a computerized tax billing system.

Wittman then served on the Westmoreland County Board of Supervisors in 1995 and became chairman of that body in 2003, leading the way for building three new libraries and raising teacher salaries. Two years later, voters sent him to the Virginia House of Delegates, representing the 99th legislative district. He was re-elected in November 2007.

Wittman never dreamed he’d be running for Congress. But on Oct. 6, 2007 Congresswoman Jo Ann Davis lost a long battle with cancer. Wittman received the Republican party’s nomination for the position on Nov. 10, and won the special election a month later with more than 60 percent of the vote.

“Jo Ann Davis was a tremendous lady. I can’t think of a more dedicated public servant, and I hope I can accomplish a fraction of what she did, and if I do, I will consider myself widely successful,” Wittman says.

He adds that the lessons learned at VCU will serve him well in Washington.

“My whole experience at VCU helped me to learn how to really distinguish between public policy and politics.”

Robert J. Wittman

2002 Doctor of Philosophy ★ College of Humanities and Sciences

L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs – Professional Achievement
As a 33-year veteran in the field of education, Patricia I. Wright has worked tirelessly to improve Virginia’s school systems. She has provided leadership and technical assistance in developing and implementing early childhood, elementary and secondary education programs — specifically in mathematics — throughout her career at the Virginia Department of Education. It has been quite an educational journey.

“I have learned many lessons that have shaped my approach as a professional educator,” Wright says, including, “There is a time to lead and a time to follow; good leaders recognize which role to assume.”

It was while teaching mathematics at Matoaca High School in Chesterfield County, Va., that Wright decided to pursue a master’s degree at Virginia Commonwealth University. There, her interest in education blossomed.

“As a graduate student studying under dedicated and expert VCU faculty members, I developed a passion for mathematics and curriculum and instruction that inspired my career,” Wright says.

Wright joined the Virginia Department of Education as a principal specialist for mathematics in 1985 and rose through the department’s ranks. She currently serves as chief deputy superintendent of public instruction, a position she was appointed to by Gov. Tim Kaine in 2006. Day to day, Wright works closely with the governor’s office, the Virginia Board of Education, professional organizations and local school divisions in designing and implementing Virginia’s standard-based accountability and support systems. She also has been a member of the National Governor’s Association Task Force on Graduation and Dropout Rates since 2005.

“The VCU School of Education has been a launching pad for many regional, state and national leaders in education,” Wright says. “I speak from experience.”

At VCU, Wright also experienced numerous interests outside her scholarly pursuits due in large part to the school’s urban location. “VCU provides its students with many opportunities to grow through educational and cultural experiences,” she says. “While taking classes, I enjoyed the convenience of nearby restaurants, museums and Capitol Square.”

Wright has kept close ties with VCU in the years since she graduated, most recently as a board member for the VCU Alumni Association. In 2005, the university honored her with a Distinguished Alumni Service to Education Award. She treasures her VCU experiences and memories.

“VCU provides a sense of community for students and alumni, especially because of the university’s tremendous contributions to the revitalization of downtown,” Wright says. “It makes alumni proud to be graduates of the university.”