

## **Joel Elliott, recipient of a Payne Award for courage, learns journalism "can bring change in a powerful way"**

By Tom Bennett

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TOCCOA FALLS, Ga., April 19 -- Joel Elliott has the satisfaction of knowing that his alma mater, Toccoa Falls College, is going to call for plenty of proof of earned academic degrees before choosing its next president.

"I guess they will read the resumes pretty carefully this time around," Elliott said.

He reported last year in the weekly Toccoa Record and also in the college paper, the Talon, about the flawed resume of the then Toccoa Falls College president. The leader of the college of 725 full-time equivalent students in the north Georgia mountains had not earned a master's degree indicated on the resume. In addition, a doctorate is honorary.

The president resigned in June 2003. The brief controversy led to articles in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and the New York Times.

"It was the first time I really had the chance to see journalism in action, to see how it can bring change in a real powerful way," Elliott said.

Elliott graduated from the college in December with a bachelor of science degree in journalism.

He is scheduled to fly to Eugene, Oregon, in May. He is one of three recipients of this year's Payne Awards for Ethics in Journalism. The awards are presented by the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon.

Toccoa Falls College is "a private, not-for-profit, evangelical, co-educational Christian college, affiliated with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. It is... holding firmly to the truth of Scripture," states a campus brochure.

David G. Reese is the academic dean. Last year the New York Times paraphrased what it implied was his view of Elliott's actions. The writer had "found himself at a fork in the road between the Christian way and the way of a newspaperman," the Times wrote.

During an April 19 First Amendment seminar on the campus here, Joel Elliott's name and his ethical stand never came up until there were questions from the audience.

Has the college named a new president? "No," said the moderator, Jerry Fliker, director of the School of Communication.

Will it check whether the new president has earned degrees? "Yes."

Is the student who wrote accurately about the past president's shortcomings still a student? "No, he has completed his work here, and he is present here in the audience tonight."

### **THE 'SCRIBE OF SOCIETY'**

Robert Case II was the keynote speaker for the seminar. He is the executive director of the World Journalism Institute of Asheville, N.C. It "seeks to identify aspiring journalists who are Christians and help them become proficient and professional in their calling of journalism," according to its web site.

However, Case never identified any "fork in a road" between being a Christian and being a newspaperman.

"The role of the journalist of faith is to seek to understand the truth in a given situation," Case said. "I am not telling you anything new, but it does need restating at this particular time. The (Jack) Kelley affair drives us to this discussion. The journalist is the stenographer, the scribe of society -- fair, accurate, honest, careful, objective to a certain degree, agenda-free to a certain degree, and always courageous in chasing after truth.

"In some respects, being a journalist who is a Christian is no different than just being a Christian. There is no private and public split in living a Christian life. However, as journalists, we do project to a wide audience what our world view is, and so we must be self-conscious about our world view...

"Christians are not the only truth-tellers. Non-believers can also speak the truth... and Christians can lie. That's not the point. The point is: It is our obligation, our duty as Christians to always strive to write the truth, even when it contradicts our own pre-suppositions."

Jack Kelley, who as a reporter for USA Today fabricated stories imaginatively and has since resigned, is a friend of Robert Case's. Kelley was once a member of the "board of directors" of World Journalism Institute, according to salon.com, and it is a fact that Case did not dispute. However, the rugged keynoter and former Campus Crusade for Christ speaker moved to put as much distance as he could between himself and his friend.

"Jack Kelley is a congenital liar," Case said.

### **'A GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT'**

David Reese, the academic dean who in the New York Times mapped a "fork in the road", said of the resume incident::

"It was a great disappointment on the part of all of us at the college to go through that. The president obviously made a mistake. However, there were many aspects of the press treatment of that episode that were not entirely accurate."

He was asked to elaborate and he said:

"There was an article in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and it said Joel Elliott was called 'Satan' at the college," said Reese, who has a Ph.D. in New Testament from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"What a student actually said was that this was the work of Satan or of the enemy. It was not an attempt to characterize Joel in any way.

" Also, I felt that the impression that Joel was under a great deal of persecution by the administration was not really correct. The president assured him there would be no retaliation. The chairman of the board of trustees assured him this would not jeopardize his standing at the college in any way...

"In the current presidential search, the committee is being exceedingly careful to examine all credentials."

Is there a "fork in the road" dividing being a Christian and being a newspaperman?

"That was not an accurate expression of what I was trying to communicate," Reese said. "What I was saying is this: As Christians we have a higher ethical standard to adhere to. We can't, for example, just say, this is the truth. We have to say if this is only

partial truth, what effect will it have? Am I accountable to do the best I can to present the entire circumstances."

The other panelists for the seminar were Glenn Hannigan, associate editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's Gwinnett County edition, and Bryan Murley, professor of journalism and publications adviser at North Greenville College in Tigerville, S.C. Murley also is a licensed Southern Baptist preacher.

### **AN 'INNOCUOUS' CLASS PROJECT**

Joel Elliott is a 24-year-old native of Indiana who attended colleges there and in Florida before coming to Toccoa Falls College. It offered the journalism course he wanted. Elliott continues as a full-time reporter for the Toccoa Record, which is part of Community Newspapers Inc. of Athens, Ga.

Oliver Witte is, for now, an assistant professor of journalism in the School of Communication at Toccoa Falls College. It was he who assigned Joel Elliott to write articles about presidents of the college.

"It started as an innocuous class project in Advanced Reporting," said Witte, who is a former editor of SPJ's Quill magazine.

"When he realized what he had, we talked about it. We prayed about it. I wanted him to be sure he knew what he was getting involved in, especially at a time of declining enrollment here. Once I was sure he knew what he was doing, I said, 'I will back you,' and I did."

Witte has not been offered a contract for the Fall semester at Toccoa Falls College.

Tom Bennett is ethics chair for the Atlanta chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists and secretary of the Georgia First Amendment Foundation.