Appalachian Explorations
Research and Creative Endeavors at Appalachian State University
Fall 2008

Digging Deep
Clues to California’s next big earthquake are written in the sand
Comments from the Provost

This fall’s Explorations features a broad range of faculty research, from the sciences to the social sciences to the humanities, showcasing contributions that Appalachian faculty make to knowledge as global as earthquakes and as local as NASCAR.

It is difficult to overestimate the timely importance of research such as Kate Scharer’s on earthquake prediction. After the events in China last May and the even more recent earthquake in Southern California, her work takes on a special significance as essential to the way the world prepares for inevitable natural disasters. This is good example of what many Appalachian faculty members do very well: they use rigorous scientific research both to add to our basic understanding and to provide benefits of direct use to society. Tangible benefits are also at the forefront of Zack Murrell’s online herbarium, which will benefit researchers across the Southeast, and of David Nieman’s experiments with the health benefits of quercetin.

Scharer’s exploration of the nature, history and future of the San Andreas Fault might be taken as a metaphor for a broad range of research at Appalachian, where professors labor to understand the often hidden but always important fissures in both nature and culture through disciplinary lenses that range from science to the humanities. At the other end of the academic spectrum, the expression, development and exploration of universal human concerns inform Joseph Bathanti’s powerful fiction and poetry. A writer who transforms his Catholic childhood into a medium for the exploration of the faults that run through our shared humanity, offering the potential for reconciliation if not redemption, Bathanti also exemplifies what one finds in the best teacher/scholars on our campus: not only does his writing influence his students, but his work with students feeds his own craft as a writer. His Department of English colleague Tom McLaughlin stretches disciplinary limits as he writes about the cultural practice of basketball, drawing on his experience both as a cultural theorist and as a participant in informal pickup games that he terms “oldguysgames” (some of which I participated in myself several years ago). Writing about a very different sport, Peter and Janet Groothius delve into a common assumption about nepotism in NASCAR, only to discover that the ability to win trumps family influence.

This work doesn’t stop at retirement, as the story about three professors emeriti demonstrates. Their own 40-plus-year careers are dwarfed by the perspective their work has given them—Fred Webb and Loren Raymond are discovering 440-million-year-old fossil traces while mapping large sections of Southwest Virginia, and Frank Mohler finds the roots of modern theatrical technology in the Baroque traditions of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries in Europe.

I hope you will enjoy reading about these highly engaged faculty members, and that you will share my pride in their accomplishments. As our institutional research profile becomes more robust each year, with marked increases in external funding, it is gratifying to see that faculty members are both following their intellectual passions and serving the larger community in such diverse ways.

Sincerely,

Stan R. Aeschleman
Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor
Earthquake Evidence
Geologist Kate Scharer and a research team dig along California’s San Andreas Fault to determine when earthquakes occurred in the past – and when they might strike in the future.

Sacred Stories
Joseph Bathanti, author of “The High Heart” and other novels, credits Catholicism for much of his creative impulse.

Retired, But Not Really
More free time and a continued passion for their work keeps faculty emeriti active in their fields.

Cover photo: Geologist Kate Scharer points to a fault that clearly offsets brown gravel against tan sand. The faulting occurred during a large earthquake on the San Andreas Fault approximately 2,000 years ago. In the stringed mapping grid, yellow markers indicate locations of charcoal that will be collected and dated.
Geologist Kate Scharer uses everything from backhoes to trowels to reach deeply for evidence of earthquakes that have occurred over time. She and her colleagues from the University of Oregon and U.S. Geological Survey have documented dozens of earthquakes that occurred along the southern San Andreas Fault since approximately 3,000 B.C.

Their research provides valuable data to help understand risks from earthquakes in the years ahead and to update national seismic hazard maps.

The maps are used by insurance companies to set rates and by engineers when designing structures.

“Data collected by our team and others were used quite extensively in the latest hazard maps, which were released in April 2008,” said Scharer, an assistant professor in the Department of Geology. She has taught at Appalachian State University since 2005.

“It’s exciting to see your work used this way. These maps ultimately will guide allocation of earthquake mitigation funds, set insurance rates in California and direct long-term planning for infrastructure.”

Scharer said the seismic hazard maps are used by engineers to design buildings that can handle the amount of shaking expected in earthquake-prone areas.

Understanding the earthquake odds

Scharer fell in love with geology and the science of earthquakes while a student at the University of Washington. That’s when she experienced her first earthquake, too – a magnitude 5.5 quake that caused no damage but reminded Seattle residents that active faults underlie their region.

After working with an environmental consulting firm for several years, Scharer returned to school, earning a Ph.D. from the University of Oregon.

“One of the best reasons to study the history of earthquakes is to know what your odds are for earthquakes in the future,” Scharer said.

The data she and others have collected along the San Andreas fault indicate that Southern California is due for a major quake sooner than many scientists originally thought. Last year she began research on a stretch of the fault north of Los Angeles that is poorly understood. “Although preliminary, the data show the
The frequency of large earthquakes was much quicker than expected. Because these results would strongly increase hazard estimates, we will continue work there to make sure these initial observations are correct,” she said.

The San Andreas Fault is a boundary between the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate, two of many plates that form the crust of the earth. The plates move slowly over time and create fault zones where they move past each other. The San Andreas Fault runs 800 miles, with its southern section extending from Parkfield, Calif., to the Salton Sea.

Researchers uncover and document evidence of past, large-magnitude earthquakes using a backhoe to cut long trenches through the sediment, oftentimes 20 feet deep.

“When a rupture happens, the ground surface gets torn and ripped up,” Scharer said. “Sediment, such as gravel or sand, later covers and preserves the rips. We look for areas where sediment has been deposited quickly.” Scharer and students in the Department of Geology date the sediments with radiocarbon techniques to determine when the prehistoric earthquakes occurred.

Geological records indicate that the average time between major earthquakes along the southern San Andreas Fault is about 100 to 120 years. “Although longer gaps of 200 years have occurred, by all estimates we are beyond the average at this point. That has hazard mitigation and public policy planners alert,” she said.

More often than you think

While it’s the large-magnitude earthquakes with their accompanying damage that receive close media attention, several million earthquakes occur each year worldwide. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, an estimated 13,000 earthquakes ranging from magnitude 4 to 4.9 occur yearly. Among the more intense earthquakes, there are 1,000 occurring every year at magnitude 5 to 5.9, 138 at magnitude 6 to 6.9, and 17 at magnitude 7 to 7.9. At least one quake at magnitude 8 or higher occurs each year.

The 7.9 magnitude earthquake that hit China in May occurred along a fault created some 40 million years ago when the continents of India and Eurasia “smashed” into each other, creating the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau, Scharer explained. The two continents continue to bump into each other, which shortens the distance between the land masses by about two inches each year.

China’s earthquake occurred along a thrust fault, which tends to focus high levels of shaking along the rupture. If a 7.9 earthquake were to occur in California, it would affect a larger area because the San Andreas is a slip fault that moves horizontally.

“A 7.9 might be the kind of magnitude we are talking about occurring in the southern San Andreas Fault. Whereas heavy shaking occurred for about 200 kilometers along the fault in China, the same magnitude quake would induce heavy shaking for 400 kilometers along the San Andreas Fault,” Scharer said.

An updated seismic hazard map which estimates the probability of future ruptures and ground shaking is available at www.earthquake.usgs.gov/research/hazmaps/index.php.

Kate Scharer can be reached at scharerekm@appstate.edu. See related link: www.geology.appstate.edu

Top photo, Kate Scharer stands in hand-dug pit on the San Andreas Fault at Littlerock, Calif. Her feet are on the Pacific Plate, her hands show the orientation of the fault, and the North American plate is on the right. The red annotation indicates the fault line. Bottom photo, a 13-foot wide section of backhoe exposure shows prehistoric faulting, in red lines, that offsets older layers, which are highlighted in other colors. Scharer studies the deformation from “fossil,” or ancient, earthquakes along the San Andreas Fault in California.
Clues to the next earthquake are right under her feet. Above, Kate Scharer reviews field notes at a California trench that exposes sediments that were ruptured by the last six earthquakes on the southern San Andreas Fault. The oldest earthquake occurred at A.D. 540. The most recent about one meter below where Scharer is standing in 1857.

Based on evidence from geologic deposits exposed in deep trenches, the average time between major earthquakes along the southern San Andreas Fault is about 100 to 120 years, according to the research team.

The historic record includes two earthquakes on the southern San Andreas Fault:

1812 – 7.5 magnitude (estimated)
1857 – 7.9 magnitude (estimated)

“It's been 150 years since the 1857 earthquake occurred. That span is what concerns geologists,” says Assistant Professor Kate Scharer.
Joseph Bathanti is a prolific writer, one who celebrates the power of storytelling both as the artist and the teacher.
The year is 1959. A 6-year-old Catholic school boy named Joseph is near paralysis for fear of nuns and wrist-slapping rulers. He is told that “the host,” a wafer taken at communion, is the body and blood of Christ. He takes this literally.

One day, a nun tells Joseph a story to frighten him into taking communion seriously. She tells him about a boy, roughly the age he is now, who didn’t swallow the host when it was given to him. Instead, the boy slipped the wafer into his pocket until he got home, where he pulled the wafer out and nailed it to his bedroom wall as if it were an Elvis poster. As the defiant boy pounded the wafer into sheetrock, the host began bleeding. It bled until a crimson flood washed the little boy away. He was never heard from again.

Imagine young Joseph gulping air as the sister talks, her habit swishing around her feet like a dark, fallen halo. He takes this story seriously. He takes all stories seriously.

The year is 2008. The story of the bleeding wafer haunts creative writer and English professor Joseph Bathanti even here, in Appalachian State University’s well-lit Crossroads Café, hundreds of miles from his childhood neighborhood and years away from the reign of nuns. It is, surprisingly, a beneficial haunting. He explains, “I liked being part of Catholicism’s cool, ritualistic club. I liked the vespers and the incense and the secrecy... Catholicism was absolutely like magical realism. A little boy nailing the host to his wall with a flood of blood coming at him, you could see that in a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel.”

Elaborate images of saints and angels filled the classrooms of Bathanti’s Catholic school and most living rooms in East Liberty, the working class, Italian neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pa., he grew up in. He credits Catholicism for much of his creative impulse. He explains, “Going to religion class was like taking another literature class. The Bible is just one groovy adventure after another. You couldn’t imagine making those characters up. And the saints! There’s a patron saint for everything, and they all come with a story.”

He says, “I feel like I had the last great American childhood. I lived in an old fashioned, Old World neighborhood. I played baseball and went to see the Pittsburgh Pirates... I had a grandfather who wore an epic suit with a white shirt and gold watch.” He gestures to where the pocket watch’s metallic chain once rested on his grandfather’s chest. The motion is reminiscent of someone making the sign of the cross.

East Liberty has provided the setting for two of his three books of fiction, “East Liberty” and “The High Heart,” both coming-of-age stories. In this way, he has given readers a portal to his past. He says, “That’s the power of stories. When everything else evaporates, you still have story, memory.”

Though Bathanti’s fictional characters are not necessarily religious, his creative endeavors often have redemption at their heart. He explains, “In Judeo-Christian beliefs, a lot of stories follow the arc of redemption—conflict, crisis, resolution... I’m not part of the Catholic Church anymore, technically, but that whole belief system of human imperfection is what my stories are about. You don’t want perfect characters; you want imperfect characters because they’re like us. They give us hope.”

Bathanti’s success writing poetry, novels, short stories, plays, and works of creative nonfiction is enough to give his creative writing students hope as they toil over their own manuscripts. After he graduated from The University of Pittsburgh with a B.A. and M.A. in English literature, Bathanti came to North Carolina in 1976 as a VISTA volunteer. He worked in the state prison system during his time with VISTA, and went on to earn an M.F.A. in creative writing from Warren Wilson College. His experience with VISTA later provided material for his prison-based novel, “Coventry,” which received the 2006 Novello Literary Award.

Bathanti joined Appalachian’s creative writing program in 2001. His long list of awards includes the Wachovia Playwrights Prize, a Literature Fellowship from the North Carolina Arts Council, the Samuel Talmane Ragan Award, the Linda Flowers Prize, the Sara Henderson Hay Prize and the 2002 Sherwood Anderson Foundation Fiction Award. Additionally, Bathanti has been nominated for Pushcart Prizes in short fiction, creative nonfiction and poetry. He has written four volumes of poetry, including “This Metal,” which was nominated for the National Book Award. His nonfiction book “They Changed the State: The Legacy of North Carolina’s Visiting Artists, 1971-1995” was recently published by the North Carolina Arts Council.

Prolific is a word often associated with creative people, but Bathanti’s career turns the word into something that, like the story of the bleeding host, has the surreal qualities of magical realism. He is a tireless writer. The books and awards and honors keep coming, and coming, and coming. “Land of Amnesia,” a book of poetry based on his Linda Flowers Prize-winning poems, is slated to be released in spring 2009. “The High Heart,” winner of the 2006 Spokane Prize for Short Fiction, was named the 2008 summer reading assignment for incoming freshmen at St. Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, N.C. Reviewer Jess Walter wrote, “Vivid and engaging, ‘The High Heart’ satisfies that mysterious quality of great fiction by managing to be both truthful and artful...”
Emeriti professors remain active researchers at the same time. Bathanti was deeply honored by St. Andrews’ choice of freshman reading material, but the career award he’s most proud of remains his national Ernest A. Lynton Award in teaching. In 1999, the spokesman for the award wrote, “Joseph Bathanti’s belief in the power of writing extends the walls of his classroom to encompass the community.” It still does.

Bathanti’s belief in the power of writing also extends beyond his own storytelling. The professor feels called to help others appreciate their personal stories by helping them hone their writing. Thirty-two years after his VISTA contract ended, Bathanti continues to go into the state’s prison system to lead writing workshops. Bathanti says, “I feel like writers and artists and teachers are to promote tolerance and peace, and I see stories as a way to do that. You can almost always find a shared humanity in stories that lead toward reconciliation rather than strife.”

For a story to do such extraordinary things, it must be a finely wrought piece of writing. Bathanti enjoys plying his trade surrounded by aspiring wordsmiths at Appalachian. He is at odds with writers who claim their work suffers because they’re forced to read sub-par student writing. He says of teaching, “It makes me a more conscientious writer. I don’t read student stories for pleasure—not that they’re not pleasurable—but I’m reading them as an editor. Sometimes I’m able to articulate things to students about their work that I’m not able to articulate to myself. When I give advice I’m able to take that advice and use it…and it’s inspiring when I see kids writing great stuff. It makes me want to write. It’s like how seeing a lot of ball games makes you want to strap on your cleats and oil up the glove. These kids are writing stories! I want to write stories!”

Writing is taught through apprenticeship more than lectureship, and this is a fact that Bathanti’s union-card-holding family members surely appreciate. Not long ago, Bathanti gave a reading in Pittsburgh and much of his extended family came to see his presentation. He says, with humility, “I have a sprawling, wondrous family… They’re all cement finishers and tailors. When I go up there to give a reading I feel so pretentious. They’re proud of me, but they’re all better than I could ever be.”

Reflecting on his writing career and his teaching position at Appalachian, Bathanti says, “My father was a steel worker and my mother was a seamstress, but this is the kind of life they wanted for me.” He puts his nearly drained cup of coffee down next to his reading glasses and quotes Richard Hugo, saying, “A creative writing class may be one of the last places you can go where your life still matters.” Bathanti continues in his own words, “Being part of a writing workshop is like being in church. Everybody’s on the same page, and they seem to care about each other. I mean, is there a better job than being part of that?” It’s a rhetorical question. His smile indicates he already knows the answer.

Creative writing is an art, but it’s also hard work—not the kind of brick-laying, scaffold-climbing work often detailed in Bathanti’s writing—but labor nonetheless. Given this, it makes sense that the writer’s namesake saint is considered the patron saint of workers. Bathanti talks about St. Joseph as he might any dear old friend from East Liberty, saying, “He’s a working class kind of guy, a great, charitable guy who didn’t want much limelight.” The same could be said about Bathanti, Appalachian’s venerable patron saint of stories.

**Books by Joseph Bathanti**

**Fiction**

“East Liberty”

“The High Heart”

“Coventry”

**Poetry**

“The Feast of All Saints”

“Anson County”

“Communion Partners”

“This Metal”

**Non-fiction**

“They Changed the State: The Legacy of North Carolina’s Visiting Artists, 1971-1995”

Joseph Bathanti can be reached at bathantjr@appstate.edu. See related link: www.english.appstate.edu
The briar scratches reveal a lot. As former geology professor Loren Raymond, age 65, hikes up his pant leg, it’s obvious this man has not slipped quietly into retirement. His cuts and scrapes indicate he’s still clamoring across fields and rocks with his hammer, hand lens and GPS equipment to determine the geological structure of the region’s mountains.

Fred Webb Jr., age 73, is right alongside him. Together, they continue the grant-supported geological mapping work they engaged in while teaching at Appalachian State University. They aren’t the only faculty continuing to receive grants well into retirement. Retired theatre professor Frank Mohler continues to research, and eventually publish a book on, his specialty: Baroque theater history.

Their work is a passion, these three faculty emeriti say, that still burns strong. “When I got into academics, I saw it not as a job but a hobby, too,” explained Webb, who taught at Appalachian for more than 40 years and was frequently known to stay on campus until 11 p.m. working in his office or helping students.

In Mohler’s case, it’s a matter of finally having concentrated time to devote to research. “I was hired at Appalachian as a designer, and while I was teaching I was also designing sets for all the theater productions,” the 71-year-old said. “I’d planned to work on this book for the past 20 years. Now is when I have the time to do it.”
Webb and Raymond are continuing what they describe as “the most fundamental work in geology” – tromping around the wilderness to map what’s on the earth’s surface and project what’s 4,000 to 5,000 feet below. With the help of a federal grant, they have been hired by the Virginia Division of Geology and Mineral Resources to create geological maps of Southwest Virginia for practical applications such as possible construction of a roadway paralleling Interstate 81 that would be used exclusively for trucks.

They map 80-square-mile sections at a time, which takes about two years, and gather data for use in determining such factors as slope stability, ground water resources and mining hazards. They recently completed an area near Saltville, Va., and have started on an area near Broadford, Va. “Not many people do this type of work anymore, so they call us,” said Webb, who has studied the sedimentary rocks of Southwest Virginia since his days as a graduate student at Virginia Tech. He retired from Appalachian in 2004.

Besides the expected geological formations, the pair has stumbled across the occasional bear, evidence of ancient earthquakes and a memorable outing with a former student during which they found an unusual, 10-by-7 foot slab of trace fossils thought to be the burrow holes created by some type of worm 440 million years ago.

“In the slab, you can see radial patterns of where it fed on organic material. The holes were later backfilled with sand and became fossilized,” Raymond said. He and Webb were on Clinch Mountain in Smyth County, Va., with William Miller, a 1975 Appalachian graduate who now teaches paleontology at Humboldt University in California, when they made the discovery. To their knowledge, no piece of evidence this large has ever been found with this type of trace fossils. The three men have an article on their find accepted for publication in Germany’s prestigious geology-paleontology journal Neues Jahrbuch für Geologie und Paläontologie.

When they’re not conducting field work and making maps, Webb and Raymond are writing a book combining technical information with popularized information about Southwest Virginia’s geological history, which is scheduled for publication in late 2009. They are also hosting a Virginia Geologic Field conference for 75 geologists this fall and developing a Web site that makes much of their work available in a format designed for use in the public schools.

Raymond, who retired in 2007, said he sees no reason to halt his work after leaving the university. “This has been our life, our reason for being,” he said. “Science is full of puzzles. When you solve one, you can always find more.” Webb added, “When it quits being fun, that’s when I’ll stop.”

In his career, Frank Mohler designed nearly 300 sets and lighting designs before retiring as Appalachian’s director of theatre in 2004. One of his most personally meaningful designs was the remodeling of Appalachian’s Valborg Theatre in the early 1990s which, based on his conceptual drawings, was transformed from a 1930s-style...
In 1637, opera evolved from a courtly and scholarly activity to a popular entertainment, in part, because of its use of technology for the creation of scenic spectacle,” Mohler said. “Much of this technology is what is still used today. The technology used in ‘Peter Pan’ was invented in the 17th century – although now it’s a lot safer. When I got into this research, ‘Phantom of the Opera’ was popular and I could find some of the technology used there in manuscripts in Italy from the 17th century.”

In his retirement, Mohler is revisiting a 17th-century Italian manuscript he first studied as a graduate student that details the floor plan and scene design techniques used in the 1675 Venetian opera “La Divisione del Mondo.” He is dissecting each scenic change and special effect for a book he’s writing on Baroque theater history and is beginning to make 3-D animations of them as well. These animations will be added to an educational Web site he created with a grant from the United States Institute of Theatre Technology (USITT) 10 years ago that contains dozens of computer models he created to animate Renaissance and Baroque theatrical spectacle. They can be viewed at www1.appstate.edu/orgs/spectacle/

Mohler also gives lectures in Europe on Baroque staging and in 2006 received a grant from USITT to speak at The World Baroque Theatre Conference in Český Krumlov in the Czech Republic, as well as to research the machinery of the town’s Castle Theater – a rare, surviving Baroque showcase.

For entertainment seekers of the time, Baroque theater spectacle rivaled the special effects we see in movies today. “People had never seen anything like this before,” Mohler said. “It would have been marvelous.”

The faculty emeriti may be contacted at webbfj@appstate.edu, raymondla@appstate.edu and mohlerfc@appstate.edu. See related links: www.appstate.edu/~webbfj/, www.appstate.edu/~raymondla/ and www1.appstate.edu/orgs/spectacle/
Through a $498,000 National Science Foundation grant, associate professor Zack Murrell is creating an online network that will link 150 herbaria located across the Southeast, and make the collections accessible and searchable on the Internet.

“This project, which will make about 12 million specimens available for study from across the Southeast, would not have happened without Dr. Bill Carpenter’s work to establish Appalachian’s herbarium,” said Murrell, who teaches in the Department of Biology.


Carpenter was known for his unique method of collecting plants. When taking students on field trips, he often pulled his vehicle off the side of the road without warning whenever he spotted an interesting plant—no matter how fast he was driving at the time.

“He could go down the road at 60 or 70 miles an hour, screech on the brakes, and pull into the ditch after noticing some plant that no one had ever seen before,” said Richard Henson, a professor emeritus from the Department of Biology.

Researchers expand study of quercetin’s health benefits

Appalachian researchers will soon complete a research study that has involved the largest number of test subjects ever evaluated at the university.

The researchers are examining the effectiveness of quercetin in reducing sickness from upper respiratory infections.

A total of 1,000 volunteers are involved in the project: 500 ingested a quercetin chew or a placebo twice a day for 12 weeks during the first phase of the study this winter, and in August another 500 began taking a liquid quercetin supplement twice a day for 12 weeks.

The research is supported by a $1.03 million grant from Quercegen Pharma based in Newton, Mass., which markets QU995, a highly purified (99.5 percent pure) quercetin. Quercetin is a natural antioxidant derived from plants, such as red apples, red grapes and broccoli.

The interdisciplinary research team includes faculty from the Department of Health, Leisure and Exercise Science, the Department of Biology and the Department of Psychology.

Exercise immunologist David Nieman, who is the primary investigator for the project, and other Appalachian faculty began their research of quercetin using QU995 in 2005 through a two-year, $1.1 million contract awarded by the U.S. Department of Defense. As a result of their findings, the supplement is being tested by the military to help maintain the immune systems of troops who are undergoing the physical and cognitive stresses of combat.

In the current study, researchers will determine quercetin’s health benefits when consumed by members of the general population who are undergoing the typical stress experienced in everyday life.

Nieman hypothesizes that taking quercetin will reduce the incidence and severity of upper respiratory tract infections, augment mental vigilance and mood, and reduce inflammation and blood lipids.

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Tom McLaughlin, with part of Appalachian’s lunchtime squad.

Professor writes cultural study of pickup basketball

Tom McLaughlin is so passionate about basketball he wrote a book about it.

But the English professor’s passion runs deeper than appreciating a full-court press or sinking a 23-foot jump shot. He’s passionate about the camaraderie and community that develops within backyard and recreational pickup games, and how the game addresses social, economic and ethical issues.

He details these perspectives in “Give and Go: Basketball as a cultural practice” published by the State University of New York Press.

McLaughlin got the idea for his book after playing more than 20 years in what he calls the “oldguygame,” a regular gathering of Appalachian faculty and staff who meet at lunch to play pickup ball.

Written for academic and general audiences, the book combines a reflection of his own experiences with research on topics such as community building, ethical theory and decision making.

“One of the big themes of the book is the idea of negotiation,” said McLaughlin, who loves the free-form nature of the game. “Because there are no coaches, referees, league commissioners or general managers, the players have to negotiate what the game is going to be like.” Because of that, McLaughlin describes pickup basketball as a rough democracy. “The players themselves are in charge; there is no hierarchy,” he said.

The book also addresses basketball and the media. McLaughlin believes televised basketball oversimplifies the game and that camera placement, editing and narration make every game look the same. Basketball movies, he said, tend to focus on players’ obedience to the coach.

“That’s why I always preferred pickup ball,” McLaughlin said. “Pickup basketball is improvised like jazz, like rap. It’s made up in the moment and to me, that’s one of the big excitement of basketball, being totally in the moment and creating it on the fly.”

The Petty family, all four generations.

Nepotism in NASCAR?

For years, racing fans joked that the “N” in NASCAR meant nepotism. That was because of the many family connections that permeated the racing industry. For example, almost one third of drivers racing in NASCAR events in 2005 had a family connection.

“The best drivers have sons who join NASCAR,” Peter Groothuis, an independent researcher.

Their research, “Nepotism or Family Tradition: A Study of NASCAR Drivers,” was included in the June 2008 issue of the Journal of Sports Economics.

The couple looked at 30 years of career statistics housed in the Stock Car Racing Collection in Appalachian’s Belk Library and Information Commons along with online materials. They created a data set that compared career length and frequency of wins among families such as the Petrys, Jarretts, Allisons and Earnhardts with that of other drivers without family connections.

“Some fans thought family status mattered, that nepotism was occurring,” Peter Groothuis said. “We thought it would be interesting to see if that was true.”

In addition to data about father and son NASCAR drivers, they also looked at the racing records of brothers of drivers.

“When you look at all drivers and compare their records with those who have family connections in the sport, there isn’t much difference in the length of their records after controlling for performance,” Jana Groothius said.

Career following isn’t just a sports phenomenon. It occurs among actors, politicians, lawyers, physicians and other professions where a son or daughter chooses to follow in a parent’s career footsteps, Peter Groothius explained.

Just like in those professions, sons of NASCAR drivers benefit from growing up in the industry, being at the track with their family, and fan loyalty to the family name.

“We did find that fathers end their careers earlier if they have a son follow them in racing,” Peter Groothius said. “But it’s only really the best racers who tend to have sons who join NASCAR. We think that occurs because the sons are able to extend the brand of the family name.”
Fred Webb Jr. Outdoor Geology Laboratory, dedicated in April 2008

Students can examine igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary rocks without leaving campus in the new Fred Webb Jr. Outdoor Geology Laboratory, named in honor of the retired professor who spent some 40 years at Appalachian State University and was the first chairman of the Department of Geology. Located adjacent to Rankin Science Building, the lab features rock specimens dating between 1.2 billion and 300 million years old. Each specimen weighs one to three tons. The rocks come from four states and were donated by alumni, regional quarries and Lees-McRae College.