

A MENU OF MEMORIES



Thirty years after creating a home away from home in New York, the members of New Georgia reunite in Athens

by Allyson Mann (MA '92)

It is early November, and Franklin College Dean Garnett Stokes is addressing a group of UGA alumni at Athens restaurant Five & Ten. The occasion is a dinner honoring New Georgia, a group of drama students who left Athens and created a family of sorts in New York, meeting annually for Thanksgiving dinner. Now, 30 years later, the members are in Athens for a visit—some for the first time since leaving in the late 1970s.

"I'm just so delighted that we are able to meet with a group like you," Stokes says. "You are a model for the University of Georgia."

There is a moment of silence following Stokes' words, and then the room erupts into laughter.

Later, founding members Carl Clifford (BFA '77) and Dave Wright (M '77) explain that the members of New Georgia meant no disrespect to Dean Stokes.

"It's hard for us to imagine ourselves as..." Clifford begins and then trails off, at a loss for words.

"...as models for anybody," Wright finishes.

A 1975 student production of "The Hot L Baltimore" brought several members of the New Georgia group together: Clifford, Wright, Ned Bridges (BFA '79), Lynne Jebens (M '77) and Brian Reddy (MFA '77).

"Little did you know that you were getting sucked into something that was going to be your family for the next 30 years," Jebens says.

After forging close friendships at UGA it was only natural that when Wright and Wayne Knight (M '77) moved to New York in the spring of 1977, their friends would come to visit—and some would end up

(clockwise from top left) Sam Green, Dave Wright (M '77), Wayne Knight (M '77) and Barbara Woods (BFA '81) prepare for New Georgia's 1986 annual Thanksgiving dinner. The background photo is the Dorilton (West 71st Street and Broadway), the Manhattan apartment building that served as headquarters for New Georgia.

staying permanently.

When they arrived, New York was broke and reeling from the Son of Sam murders. Within a few months, there was a 24-hour, city-wide blackout that led to widespread fires and looting. Manhattan's Upper West Side, where Knight and Wright eventually settled, was dirty and dilapidated. But apartment 3-C at the Dorilton (West 71st Street and Broadway) became their home and the headquarters of New Georgia, especially when Clifford and Helen Butler (BFA '77) arrived several months later. As more Georgia transplants arrived, they put them up and used their connections to help them get work.

"We had this underground railroad sneaking Georgians into the Upper West Side," Wright says. "And before you know it, there was about 20 of us living within a few blocks of each other."

"I remember Dave literally putting his arm around me and saying, 'Well, do you want to work at the restaurant [the Copper Hatch] or the club?'" says Meg Anderson (M '79). "He took me over to the restaurant and introduced me to the manager, who simply had no choice, and said, 'Tony, she's

up from Georgia, we have a new one here, so put her on the schedule.'"

No one could afford to go home for Thanksgiving that first year, so they planned their own celebration. It became an annual tradition that lasted more than 20 years, a classic Southern covered-dish dinner with printed menus and whimsically named dishes (e.g., I Yam Strong, I Yam Invincible, I Yam Candied). They took on another project too—staging a 1979 Off-Off-Broadway production of "The Touch Dreamed Up," written by John Kendall Wilson (MFA '78) and produced in UGA's Lab Theater as his thesis project. Wright directed, reviving his role as the "Old Man," Jebens again played "Mama," Clifford managed the production and Barbara Hause (BFA '76) designed the costumes. Butler, Knight and Reddy worked on the crew.

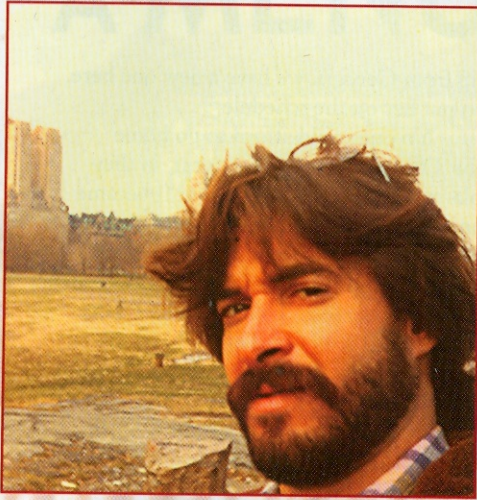
Knight was Wright's first choice to play the "Old Man," but by then he had earned a role in the Broadway show "Gemini." In typical fashion, the group celebrated with a one-for-all attitude.

"That night was one of the great, great nights of all time," Reddy says. "Word

The members of New Georgia celebrated Thanksgiving with a classic Southern covered-dish potluck every year from 1977 to 1999.



CARL CLIFFORD



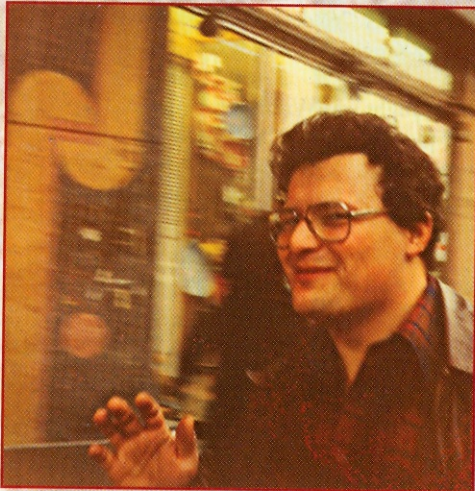
CARL CLIFFORD



PETER FREY

CARL CLIFFORD

Profession: Production Manager/Producer
Nickname: The Governor
Thanksgiving dish: black-eyed peas (Carl's Burn Your Keister Little Peasters, 1988)



CARL CLIFFORD



PETER FREY

WAYNE KNIGHT

Profession: Actor
Best Known As: Newman, Jerry's nemesis on "Seinfeld"
Thanksgiving dish: stuffing (Wayne's Huffin' & Puffin' Stuffin', 1986)



CARL CLIFFORD



PETER FREY

DAVE WRIGHT

Profession: Private Investigator
Quotable: "My last quarter here I had to dissect a rat at 7:50 in the morning with a hangover."
Thanksgiving dish: greens (Dave's Why Mustard We Always Have These Damn Greens, 1993)

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spread that Wayne got a Broadway show, and we all ran down to the Copper Hatch and were up all night because one of ours was on Broadway."

That kind of camaraderie made it easier for the Georgians to make it in New York.

"Individually in New York, we might not have stayed there as long as we did," Clifford says.

"It was hard getting a job and getting settled in," Wright says. "I know if these guys hadn't been there, I would've left."

"This smells exactly the same, doesn't it, Helen?" Paul Gendreau (BFA '78) says in UGA's costume shop.

The group is touring the Fine Arts Building and reliving old memories. After getting an update on renovation plans from theatre department head David Saltz, the group enters the fine arts theater. By all accounts, very little has changed in 30 years.

"Oh, dear God," Reddy says.

"Ah, the memories," Jebens says.

Discussion quickly turns to specifics. Will an acoustical engineer be involved? Will they add a center aisle? Have they considered lowering the stage and raising the house? As Saltz explains, these questions will be addressed this summer, when UGA begins the top-to-bottom renovation of the building.

Despite the jokes and anecdotes, it's clear that the group has extensive experience in theater. Though they don't seem to take themselves too seriously, they have amassed an impressive list of credits. Clifford has produced or production managed 35 movies including "Stomp the Yard," "Coyote Ugly" and "Apollo 13." Butler has worked in costuming on more than 75 films and television projects, earning two Emmy nominations. Bridges acted for 15 years in regional stage, New York stage, movies and TV. Hause has worked as wardrobe supervisor on more than 60 films including "I Am Legend" and such TV projects as "The Sopranos." Knight, best known for the role of Newman on "Seinfeld," has appeared on stage and screen in projects including "Jurassic Park," "Basic Instinct" and "3rd Rock From the Sun." Stage veteran Reddy has also appeared onscreen in "Numb3rs," "Gilmore Girls"



PETER FREY

UGA student Renee Stander (left) talks with costume designer Helen Butler (BFA '77) after a workshop on production, technical crew and wardrobe design and supervision in film and TV.

and “O Brother, Where Art Thou?”

And the group is generous—and honest—about sharing their expertise and experiences with students.

“My main reason for taking acting was that it had the least amount of math,” Barbara Woods says.

Woods (BFA '81) and nine members of New Georgia are serving as a panel for a colloquium hosted by UGA's Department of Theatre and Film Studies. With nearly 100 students and faculty in attendance, they recount how they came to UGA and became part of the New Georgia group. During an informal lunch in the Fine Arts Building's lobby, Reddy advises master's student Koqunia Forté to begin her career in New York by finding a community that she can work in and network from there.

“I appreciated that he approached me as a colleague,” Forté says later. “It was really encouraging to be seen as someone ready to take the next step.”

Later that afternoon, the New Georgia members split into panels exploring TV and film production, public relations in film and other media, creative career options using theater training and developing new theater opportunities. During the workshop on acting and casting in film, TV and theater, Knight, Reddy and casting agent Jebens dispense advice in between ribbing each other.

“What it takes is sometimes crystalline belief in yourself, an unreasonable amount of hope, and no facility to do anything else,” Knight says. “So if you

have any other skills, you should probably do that.”

“Never, never slack off, because there's 10 people behind you,” Reddy says.

Forté took that advice to heart.

“This is a business,” she says. “They were very frank about telling us the importance of being professional.”

After the workshops, Clifford, Knight and Wright take a few moments to reflect on their UGA experience.

“The students were great. They were terrific,” Clifford says. “They know a lot more than we did when we were here. They've got a little bit more practical background, I think, and they had very

good questions about practical experience versus what they're learning here.”

But the three are troubled by the fact that very little seems to have changed.

“You're walking down a hallway with cinder block walls and down cement stairs to a laboratory theater,” Knight says.

“We come back 30 years later, and it just looks like...” Wright begins.

“It looks like when we left,” Clifford says.

The three are not concerned, however, about the future of New Georgia. Although there are no current plans, they're confident that there will be another reunion.

“Something will happen, I know,” Clifford says. “But it's better to just let it happen.”

“What year is this?” Knight asks.

“Aught seven,” Wright replies.

“London, 2009,” Knight suggests.

“New Georgia leaves the United States.”

The friends chuckle at the idea.

Clifford takes it one step further:

“New Georgia goes into space.”

They erupt in laughter. **GM**

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(left to right) Lynne Jebens (M '77) and Barbara Woods (BFA '81) react as actor Wayne Knight (M '77), best known as Newman on “Seinfeld,” reads “The Big Quill: The Ultimate New Georgia Thanksgiving Menu” at a reunion dinner held at Athens restaurant Five & 10 in November.



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