Interview with Thomas (Tom) Wilborn
Lead Groundskeeper of Wake Forest’s Facilities & Campus Services
by Laurel Hearn

LH: Could you tell me about your parents and where you grew up?

TW: Well, I’m from Winston, I guess as far as how deep you want to go…

LH: What did your parents do? Could you tell me about your siblings?

TW: Oh, my mom owns a cleaning business. My dad—he actually does what I do. He is at old Salem, and he’s been there for 25 years. Of course, I ended up here at Wake Forest, so we split the city…. Other than that, my brother and my sister are pretty much into the same things but a little more in depth as far as business. We have strong entrepreneurial spirit within our family, so that’s what we do.

LH: Okay, great! Could you just talk a little bit about what entrepreneur spirit means to you?

TW: We pretty much like to learn things. Like I said, my mom…she’s been doing a janitorial business for years. And I, myself, do landscaping outside of this [Wake Forest]. My sister pretty much does her housekeeping things with various other things that she does, as well as selling merchandise. She is strong in sales. And my brother…he’s probably on my side of things, but he deals a lot with a lot with cars and things of that nature – so we have a good knack for business and, you know, doing things like that.

LH: I can already tell that y’all take a lot of pride in your work.

TW: Yeah, pretty much. That’s the way we were raised – just hard work. You were pretty much raised thinking, “Whatever you put your mind to, you can do.”

LH: So why did you choose Wake Forest?
**TW:** You know, I kind of… I look at it like a blessing, because I had never actually been on this campus until I was about twenty. I actually got hired here through a temporary service, and I never would have thought I would be here for fifteen years.

**LH:** Fifteen years, wow. Dedication…

**TW:** Yeah, I never would have thought it but, like I said, I was doing landscaping and I came [to Wake Forest], and they hired me on after my probational period was over with the temporary service. So you know, at twenty, and not enrolled at college--that was good money for me at that time, so it was good. And I have been here ever since. I have reached a few milestones here – I was one of our lead groundskeepers here. I had a supervisory position, so it has paid off. I’ve stayed.

**LH:** Do you like being around students? How is it being around college age kids?

**TW:** I like it, generally, because I’m a people person. I like meeting people. I like meeting, you know, people who have different backgrounds than myself, and pretty much people who are skilled in other things, so I like, personally, to surround myself by people who kind of work outside my field.

**LH:** Absolutely, it does.

**TW:** I’m not a stranger, so… if I stuck my head against something, I could always call someone…so that’s how I treat life.

**LH:** Could you tell me a little bit about what you do? I’m sure there are a ton of job responsibilities.

**TW:** Yeah, it’s mainly… my crew is the grounds crew.

**LH:** Okay
TW: We pretty much mow all the lawns.

LH: And I know Wake Forest is very particular about their grounds, particularly the quad.

TW: The quad is like big business, but we’re responsible for mowing all of inner campus. And of course weeding, keeping sidewalks blown; actually, my group also does moves around campus from building to building, and pretty much anything else that needs to be done. We pitch in on about anything and everything…mainly the lawns here on inner campus.

LH: Okay. And how many people would you say do you work with?

TW: Up close, there are six.

LH: Okay.

TW: Yeah, up close, there are six, but the whole group is probably over twenty. Twenty-three, twenty-four.

LH: Could you tell me a little bit about your relationship with your boss? I emailed you through Paul. He is your supervisor?

TW: Yeah, he is my direct supervisor.

LH: Okay, great. The reason I’m asking is because in class we were talking about the main reason why people quit their job is because they have a poor relationship with their boss. So since you’ve been here for fifteen years, it must be a good dynamic.

TW: It’s a good relationship. I think he’s an awesome individual. One that has a lot of character and integrity, so our relationship is easy. He is one of the best bosses I’ve had
since I’ve been here. It’s not challenging at all. He’s very genuine as far as talking and having discussions.

**LH:** Do you have a family of your own?

**TW:** Yeah, I do.

**LH:** Could you tell me about them?

**TW:** Yeah, should I count the years… I’ve been married for twelve years. I have a son that’s sixteen. I have another son that is eleven. And I have a daughter who will be two this month. God’s been good to me.

**LH:** Oh, wow! Great age differences!

**TW:** I have always felt blessed. I think it’s a good thing.

**LH:** Do they have any clue what they want to do? I mean when I was really young I wanted to be Minnie Mouse, so do they have anything they want to do right now?

**TW:** We are very strong in music, so we do a lot of music. I actually play a little piano.

**LH:** I used to play the piano a lot!

**TW:** Yeah, great! And I play the organ.

**LH:** Oh wow! The organ is a tough instrument.

**TW:** Yeah. It’s a challenge, it’s a challenge. I play that. My wife sings. My oldest son, he actually plays drums for our church. He’s been playing the drums since he was three.
My younger son, he can do anything. Anything in the arts – he dances, he sings, he plays drums also.

**LH:** I think that’s so important too, for schools to incorporate the arts. And you mentioned playing for church, would you say religion, then, is a big part of your life?

**TW:** Yes, a big, huge part. It’s like mostly all I do. I’m actually a preacher on the side.

**LH:** Oh wow.

**TW:** I read a lot of books. I’m actually a pastor. Not what you would think would be traditional, because I’m not over a congregation, but I assist my pastor in like small-cell (unclear) groups.

**LH:** So, if someone were to define “Thomas Wilborn”, what would you say first? Sorry, I know that’s a difficult question. What would you say is the most important to you?

**TW:** That’s a good question…

**LH:** So you’ve mentioned your family, your church, obviously your job here.

**TW:** Well, I believe that family should be first. Faith, of course, would be second. And um, I think that’s it.

**LH:** So family and faith. I think that’s a wonderful outlook.

**TW:** That’s all I have. I mean, you take that from me you pretty much have a shell. That’s literally the truth.

**LH:** Yeah, my family is super important to me too. Family means everything.
TW: Yeah, it’s very important. That’s pretty much the way I look at it.

LH: Can you tell me where your sons go to school?

TW: Flat Rock Middle School and my oldest son…he goes to Parkland High School.

LH: And then the two year old obviously isn’t at school.

TW: Yeah, she’s with grandma all day, so—

LH: Yeah, that’s so great to have family support. I used to love going over to my grandma’s house.

TW: Yeah, she does too. She can get her way. Every time, she can ransack our house, and she will just say “That’s cute!”

LH: Can I ask where you see yourself in ten years down the road?

TW: Actually, that’s a good question.

LH: Do you want to stay at Wake Forest? Or do you want to focus more on your pastor responsibilities?

TW: Let me start by saying this. I’m actually seeking God for my next [move], because I want to venture off into business. Unfortunately, I don’t know what part. And then, at the same time, I want to go back to school and possibly get a degree in theology or religion. So, you know, it’s hard to say. I’m just wondering, because I really take one thing at a time. And I believe in divine placement and divine order and things like that. It’s going to be, it’s going to be.
LH: So whatever happens, will happen.

TW: Yeah, I’ve been here 15 years, if it takes me ten more, I’d be willing to take that trip. But I won’t get myself fired. And that’s just because I really want to venture into something else. But this has been an awesome place; it has really served a purpose.

LH: And I just want to let you know that all of us really appreciate everything y’all do for us. It must be difficult putting up with college kids.

TW: Actually, I haven’t like had any bad experiences. Like I said, I’m sometimes thinking, “Okay, oh well, why did they do that?” Like I said, you can’t be a people person and love people without talking, so I treat everyone as a friend until they prove themselves otherwise.

LH: I have a couple more questions. You said you would be interested in pursuing a degree in theology, so have you taken classes before? Has it always been something that interested you?

TW: I do little study courses. I haven’t been to college, but I partake in many study courses and different types of training seminars, conferences...

LH: And they interest you?

TW: Yeah, a lot. I really love it. The only thing, I probably would be in college, but I like to juggle things. Which means I don’t have time. All this stuff runs together...

LH: Our class in focusing on the American Dream and whether or not the “dream” still exists”….so do you think that America is still the land of opportunity?

TW: I would think it depends on how you define a dream, and whether it would coincide with where you are. Because, I mean, for some, the American dream was simply to own a house and to have a good job. I guess, I’m going to say for myself, my dream
would be 1) like everyone else [dreams], to not to have to work so hard for what I’ve got, but at the same time be comfortable. And pretty much, just to live life to the fullest. Which means, basically, no head-aches, no worries, and no anxieties. I think that’s the American Dream for me: being in total purpose, and finding my purpose in life and pushing through that.

**LH:** So then, you would say that the American Dream is more individual, and varies from person to person.

**TW:** I would say so. At least for me it is. That’s the way I decide things, because, personally, I have two homes, I have four or five cars, I have a family, and—

**LH:** So then, the American Dream doesn’t necessarily mean financial success for you, but more along the lines of happiness and purpose.

**TW:** Yeah, absolutely. Some people are driving to accomplish and to have things. But things…sometimes I sit and think that they are vanity. They absolutely mean nothing, because if you didn’t have them, then you never had a reason to have them, and you would never miss them. But because you want them, and you achieve them, the fact that you want them gives purpose to having them. At the same time, if there never was a want or need for it, you would never miss it. You know, if someone placed you in the middle of the desert, you wouldn’t think you would need shelter, but, if shelter never came, you would just live without it.

**LH:** You would deal.

**TW:** Right, you would deal with it.

**LH:** And you wouldn’t know what you were missing.

**TW:** Exactly.