

## “Student Affairs Talk” • Jimmy Mullinax, Campus Recreation • Dec. 9, 2019

**Q: You’re from the Columbia area and had an older brother who attended Clemson --- was that a major selling point for you? What was the college decision-making process like?**

Mullinax: He was definitely an influence in where I went. In addition to that, I didn’t want to be in a large city. Even though we grew up near USC, we were not an athletic family. So, we didn’t watch a lot of sports growing up. It was more just the atmosphere and the environment here at Clemson. I applied to a few other smaller schools, but Clemson felt the best. So, when I was accepted and able to come to school here, it became the perfect choice for me.

**Q: You were involved in Army ROTC from the beginning?**

Mullinax: Yes. I was involved. I got a three-year Army ROTC scholarship out of high school. That allowed me to come to Clemson as well. Although it wasn’t as expensive back then, it was still expensive for me and my family. So, that allowed me to come. I started as a freshman and continued on the entire time I was here, before commissioning as a lieutenant in the Army upon graduation.

**Q: You graduated from Clemson in December 1994. Just a few short months later after the commissioning, you reported to Texas for some basic training, right?**

Mullinax: After staying here 5 ½ years and changing my major and focusing on what I really wanted to do (industrial management), I found my passion in transportation logistics. I went in the Army able to do the same thing. I went out to El Paso, Texas and Fort Bliss in air defense artillery in February. I did my basic training in air defense before earning my first assignment in South Korea.

**Q: We’ve talked at length about air defense artillery before. Tell us what all that involved.**

Mullinax: When I went to Korea, I was part of a battery for the patriot missile. They had just gotten deployed over to Korea in 1994. I was one of the first individual augmentees to go over to this unit. They do individual replacement versus a whole

unit deployment. So, I became a platoon leader and basically was one of a couple of lieutenants who sat in a control van that pushed a button to fire a patriot missile, if needed, to shoot down an aircraft or another rocket coming in from North Korea. Very eye opening. An important job, but you really understood the importance of your job. You weren’t just sitting in a van, with nothing happening. You were looking at a radar and if something was going on in North Korea, had to be alert and ready to push that button if you needed to in order to keep our armed forces safe in South Korea.

**Q: Was there anything from your background that prepared you for the magnitude of that decision, should it come your way?**

Mullinax: I grew up the youngest of three kids, with an older brother and sister. But in some ways, I was the more responsible one. I was looked to by my parents and others to do things. I had keys to the car before I could drive, because they knew I wouldn’t lose them. So, that helped when I had to sit in that van. I was in there with a couple of enlisted soldiers whose responsibilities were communications and assisting. But, if I had to make that decision, I could. My childhood and upbringing prepared me to be able to do that. And, of course, my time at Clemson in ROTC and with the Army prepared me for that experience as well.

**Q: You mentioned the deployment to Korea, but you served other assignments as well, such as in Germany. You really bounced around to a lot of different places during your time in the service. What memories stand out, as you reflect back on the Army experience?**

Mullinax: Yeah, so for me, Germany was where I went after being in South Korea. I was there for three years; it was a wonderful experience. I’d never been to Europe. And really, being able to see the culture and visit a variety of countries in Europe — the people there are very friendly and helpful. It was monumental for me, coming from a small town in South Carolina. The first time I ever went out west was when I went to basic school in El

Paso. I did things I never thought I’d do. My future wife, who I was dating at the time, was able to come over several times. We were able to create memories before we actually got married. My mom came and visited me, as well as other friends. So, I have a lot of memories of Europe. Several other assignments that I did were one in San Antonio, Texas. It was called Training with Industry, where I was able to work with a civilian company. That assignment gave me the opportunity to use my degree from Clemson in transportation logistics to work for a food service company, figure out their warehousing and how they get food out to restaurants. That was instrumental in keeping my passion for what my major was, but seeing how it connected back into the Army. And then the last moment I think of was when I was honored to be able to go out to Fort Irwin in the middle of the California desert. It’s our training center for brigade-sized units. I was part of their opposing force, acted like the enemy for other American brigades coming in to train. It was the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment, a historic unit dating to World War II. They were the unit that was defending the gap in Germany when we had forces there, before East Germany fell in the late ‘80s. The 11th ACR is a very historic unit. It’s called a “Blackhorse,” and you get to wear a Stetson hat and have a lot of tradition with that unit. It was a very memorable time.

**Q: One of the unique things about your Army experience is that it came full circle and brought you back to Clemson. Tell us about that.**

Mullinax: I commissioned after standing on the stage of Tillman Hall with my classmates in December 1994. Then, 17 years later, I had the opportunity to be selected to come back to Clemson to lead the ROTC department as a professor of military leadership. That was an awesome four years, to train cadets who were going to go out and do exactly what I did 17 years earlier. Preparing them to be officers. At the end of that four years, I was blessed to be able to retire at the same stage in Tillman Hall. The retirement officer who was present that day was my instructor at Clemson. He had retired from the Army. My professor of military leadership when I was

## “Student Affairs Talk” • Jimmy Mullinax, Campus Recreation • Dec. 9, 2019

actually a cadet worked in Tillman Hall and attended the ceremony, too. I left Clemson, came back home, and was able to retire with the same instructors I had when I was in school.

### **Q: What was it like training the newest group of officers to prepare for their Army experiences?**

Mullinax: When I came back, I didn't remember all of the challenges and how tough it was to be a cadet while being a student. The biggest thing was to realize the full plate they had, and wanting to pour into them all of the time. You realize they're a student and have academics, they're involved in other clubs and organizations. They want to make an impact beyond Army ROTC. It was exciting to see freshmen come in and maybe they didn't have previous background in the military. But, they had a desire to want to serve. Four years later, to see them transition into making decisions and being confident and understanding the ramifications of those decisions, was truly a blessing. Many of those cadets who are now Army officers have done the mandatory four years with the Army, have gotten out and started civilian careers. Many others are still in and are now captains and doing the same type of thing I was doing at Fort Irwin and commanding other soldiers. It was truly a blessing to be able to pour into our young leaders. Even when you're out in a unit, you didn't have as much time as we had to invest in their daily lives.

### **Q: You retired from the Army as a lieutenant colonel. The next step ... when did you first take notice of Campus Recreation and transition into the role you have now?**

Mullinax: When I was a professor of military leadership for Army ROTC, our cadets trained in the cold mornings inside Fike (Recreation Center). So, I got to know (executive director) Dave Frock and some of the other staff members, such as Kelly Ator. When I retired, I had a couple of neighbors in Dave and Chris Fiocchi who knew I was looking for work. But, I really didn't consider Campus Recreation. I was looking more toward manufacturing, something where I could

use my industrial management degree. Through some circumstances, a job opened up at the Snow Family Outdoor Fitness and Wellness Center doing some landscaping and managing the student staff. I did that temporarily and thought it would be a fill-in for the summer until I found a full-time job somewhere I enjoyed. But, it's something I really enjoyed. I was blessed to be offered a full-time position and have been able to move up in a few different positions, including my current position as director of facilities and operations. I oversee all of the operations for Fike, Douthit Hills Fitness Center in addition to the Snow Center.

### **Q: Let's just talk right there. The Snow Center had come along when you first took interest in Campus Rec and joining their team. But since that time, so much has gone on from Douthit Hills and its 30,000 square feet of additional fitness and recreation space that we didn't have. And then on top of that, we've since built another championship Intramural and Club Sports championship field and a new Outdoor Education Center. I imagine the days have been quite busy since you've been on staff?**

Mullinax: It's definitely not what I envisioned a little over three years ago when I started out at the Snow Family property. I was riding around on a tractor and teaching students how to cut grass with a lawnmower, and how to properly weed eat and take care of the property. I was just trying to enhance it from where it was the old Y Beach and managed by the YMCA to where it was maintained by Clemson and becoming our premier center for Intramural Sports and our outdoor wellness and fitness area. We knew the Outdoor Education Center was coming several years later, and now it's here. It's been quite busy and challenging. There have been things I've learned along the way I didn't learn in the Army. But, I had a lot of experience in the Army managing projects and people. That's been fun to use those skills and help balance getting Douthit Hills stood up, from getting equipment in place and everything functioning there, while at the same time seeing the Outdoor Education Center come up and start as well. I've got a great team

to work with me, and thankfully they have some fitness experience that I don't have and can help me fill in the gaps there. It's been awesome just to be a part of this expansion, to see where the Snow Center's going in the future. There are plans for what's going to happen out there, where it can be a student-centered space where it's a destination to hang out. It's a new area students take advantage of, just across the bridge and lake. It's off campus, but it's not really “off campus.”

### **Q: As a professor of military leadership, you were training the next group of cadets to be officers. But now, wearing this Campus Recreation hat, you're training and working with students under you to help manage these facilities and operations. Is that correct?**

Mullinax: Yes. It's a little bit different because these students are going off into a variety of careers. It's not as pinpointed as the Army. But, they all have a desire to come work for us in Campus Recreation and many have a desire to want to go into a fitness or wellness career path. So, it's good for us to be able to help them along that journey. Many are students who just want a job. It's important for me — and I try to stress this to my staff as well — but it's not always about just trying to get the job done. When you work with students, they don't always come in with all the skills as someone in a permanent position would. But, we want to develop them. We have to take time, make sure they get to graduation and that they can get a job afterwards. If they drop out, they can't work for us at Clemson. So, we've got to pour into them to make sure they're going to reach their goals. The first should be graduating Clemson, and then whatever career goals they have. It's been exciting. We've gotten close with our building student managers and some of our maintenance personnel. Keeping in contact with some of them, they're starting their careers and are doing well. It's neat knowing we played a part in that process for them.

## “Student Affairs Talk” • Jimmy Mullinax, Campus Recreation • Dec. 9, 2019

**Q: You work with a larger group of campus partners and are not just relegated to Campus Rec staff. It obviously extends well beyond that to the Division of Student Affairs, to our facilities staff. What have some of those partnerships meant to you, in terms of working collaboratively to make a better Clemson?**

Mullinax: We definitely couldn't do things without our partners. Although I help manage the facilities, I don't do the work in the facilities. We rely on them to actually do the physical work, such as electrical work, carpentry, sheet rock and painting. They take care of that, not just through their people who have the skills to do it, but also through project managers who oversee larger construction projects and some of our smaller projects as well. I'm kind of the guy who's in there making sure our vision of what we want in a space from a Campus Rec standpoint is fulfilled by all these folks who are out there. Contractors play a big role. We're involved in a variety of other things on campus as well. I've got a connection outside of Student Affairs and a traditional staff role by being able to teach as a lecturer in the College of Business. I teach in the Thomas F. Chapman scholars program. That keeps the tie-in I wanted when I left ROTC; I still wanted to teach, but not full-time. That allows me to do that, but pour into a different group of students through leadership.

**Q: Last week, you were named one of the employees of the year in the Division of Student Affairs. That had to feel good, first of all. What was your initial reaction as you were being announced?**

Mullinax: It's amazing. You start hearing things said and then you realize it's you that they're talking about. People sitting around me started smiling and saying congratulations. It was truly an honor to be recognized in that way and to be known as someone who's making a difference in Student Affairs. I told my teammates, it's great that I got recognized for this. I joke with them that I don't really do any of the work; I just tell everybody else what to do. I couldn't have done this without them. I sometimes get credit, but I want to give them credit for what they do. It was an

honor, especially not being involved in this part of Clemson but for a few years. But, we've been able to do a lot of great things by opening up Douthitt and the Snow Family Outdoor Fitness and Wellness Center. It's truly an honor to see all of this unfold for our students here at Clemson.

**Q: What was really neat — and I didn't think about it at the time as we were preparing for the awards breakfast — was seeing pictures of you and Brennan Beck together. We've done a lot of work together because he's our director of Military and Veteran Engagement. You're both Army veterans and were both named Employee of the Year. That had to be pretty cool.**

Mullinax: Yes. During the ceremony, Brennan sent me a text saying congratulations. I saw him after the breakfast and told him I wanted to take a picture together. We want to be able to promote that to our Army family that's out there at Clemson and beyond. Brennan and I work together on a variety of things to support our student veterans and ROTC cadets. It was an honor to be able to share that day with him.

**Q: Outside of work, I know you're a big family man. I see you at athletic events. What types of activities are you and the family into when you're not here in Swann Fitness Center?**

Mullinax: My wife is a fellow Clemson alumnae. We have four kids, ages 11 through 16, so we stay busy with teenager activities through sports and ballet. We enjoy spending a lot of time together, whether it's taking them somewhere or going hiking, seeing things or attending Clemson sporting events. Clemson offers a lot to faculty and staff, even for free. I can make a decision to go to a women's basketball game with 20 minutes to go in the game, and we go and have a great time. We home-school our kids and are able to spend a lot of time with them at various points throughout the year since we're not tied down to a school calendar. They come to work with me occasionally, are able to hang out and get to experience what I do at work.