It’s no secret that Stetson students are intelligent, competent and ready for the challenging education required to excel in the legal profession. They have outstanding undergraduate records, strong test scores and proven leadership abilities.
However, beyond the academic credentials lies a rich collection of amazing personal stories. From light-hearted pastimes to death-defying struggles, our students each bring their own unique thread to the fabric that is the Stetson community. Here are just a few of their stories.

Garrett Pendleton
Antarctic air traffic control technician

Garrett Pendleton’s winding road to a legal career took him from The College of William and Mary to the U.S. Marine Corps, to the South Pole, then to Embry-Riddle Aeronautic University, and finally, to Stetson.

This unusual path to the law was motivated first by the desire to earn money for a private college education, and a fascination with planes led to a six-year career in air traffic control electronics.

“Ever since I was little, I thought of the law,” said Pendleton, who became a Non-Commissioned Officer during his time in the Marine Corps. “I didn’t want a career in the military; I wanted experience and the GI Bill to help me get my education.”

His four years in the military never took him beyond the “shrimping country” shores of the Marine Corps Air Station in.
Giving back to the community

Koinonia Martin Givens
Community role model

Koinonia M. Givens has been moved by the thoughtfulness of others who have helped her pursue her education. Now she hopes to use her gifts to inspire future generations.

“So many people were there to support me over the years, now it’s my turn to give back,” said Givens, who fondly recalled one example of unexpected kindness. “When I was accepted to Yale during my senior year of high school, I had never seen the school. From out of nowhere, someone paid for me to go see the campus.” Four years later, Givens graduated from Yale with her degree in molecular, cellular and developmental biology.

Givens’ calling for community service soon evolved into a passion for the law. During her first visit to Stetson, she experienced a “burning bush moment” that assured her that she had made the right choice. “I just knew it was the place for me. While I knew that I would undoubtedly benefit from a Stetson education, Stetson would also be a community in which I could contribute, and it has certainly proved to be just that.”

When Koinonia noticed that there were few black males enrolled at Stetson, she researched the issue to discover that this was a problem for law schools nationwide. To challenge the low statistics of black men applying to law schools, she created The Cyrus Initiative: Building Bridges, Restoring Hope, funded by her Public Service Fellowship.

Through this initiative, named for a symbol of community building and restoration, Givens visits Hillsborough County high schools to encourage black males taking rigorous academic classes to realize their potential in the legal profession.

“As a whole, the legal profession benefits when there is diversity amongst its members,” said Givens. “A diverse group of counselors can more adequately represent a diverse population, and though ethnicity is only one aspect of diversity, it is the one I have chosen to focus on.”

Givens hopes that her work will create a greater awareness of community resources for African-American students and build stronger academic and cultural bridges among the Tampa Bay community as a whole.

Givens’ community leadership also extends into her life at Stetson. She serves as president of the Black Law Student Association and is a member of Moot Court Board, the Stetson Ambassadors, the Christian Legal Society and several other organizations.

Elena Antropova
Russian translator and adoption coordinator

Elena Antropova’s desire for a career in international law brought her to Stetson from half-a-world away.

In a small town on the Caspian Sea in southeast Russia, Antropova earned degrees in linguistics and education at Astrakhan State University near the Iranian border. After working as a high school teacher, college professor and legal translator, she chose to pursue her legal education not in her native Russia, but in the United States.

“An American legal education is highly valued throughout the world,” said Antropova, who noticed that most of the attorneys in Russia’s large international law firms were from the U.S. She gave up her translating job to make more time to prepare for the LSAT and TOEFL exams. During that time, she worked as an international adoption facilitator to unite Russian orphans with American families.

“I would help the families understand Russian law, and help Russian judges understand U.S. laws,” she said. Antropova hopes that by completing her American J.D. degree and eventually pursuing her Russian legal education, she will again be able to act as a bridge between the two countries.

“The legal systems are so different, and I want to try to bring these two systems closer.”

Vera June
Book author and community volunteer

Faith has guided every aspect of Vera June’s life. It permeates her writing, her work in the community and her extracurricular activities, making June an inspiration to everyone from law school colleagues at Stetson to troubled teens in her hometown of Sanford, Fla. She now hopes to share her insights with the world.

Her first book, Single and Finally Satisfied, was released in September by 1st Books Publishing. “After life taught me some lessons about relationships, I went to the word of God for answers to a few pressing questions,” said June, who began writing the book three years ago. “From my own maturity and growth, Single and Finally Satisfied was born.”

Beyond her book, June has brought the message of self-worth and faith to teens and others through her work in the community. She has served for years as an abstinence education leader and crisis pregnancy counselor. In 2002, she founded the Summer of Success Youth Camp to motivate kids from age 9-14 to focus on academic achievement. At Stetson, she hosts a monthly Bible study and e-mails weekly devotional messages as chaplain of the Black Law Students Association. She also has been a public service fellow at St. Petersburg’s Community Law Program.

June is now coordinating book signings and motivational speaking engagements to market her book, which can be ordered from 1stbooks.com, Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble bookstores. With several other writing projects in progress, June expects that her first book will be the start of a long writing career.
Beaufort, S.C., where Pendleton helped direct F-18 traffic. That changed when he accepted a position with the Scientific Research Corporation, an Atlanta-based defense contractor. “They asked me to work out of McMurdo Station in Antarctica, where they fly five months a year, 24 hours a day over a huge land mass,” he described. In this role, he maintained the navigational equipment that helped direct air traffic. The personnel at McMurdo Station, located at the edge of the Ross Ice Shelf, coordinated the air-traffic-control operations for 70 to 100 landing points over the continent and a wide range of aircraft.

“I really enjoyed my time there,” said Pendleton, who extended his stay from eight to 22 months. “It was the most beautiful place I had ever laid eyes on. The vastness was breathtaking, and there is no place in the world so remote.” When he wasn’t working with air traffic, he volunteered with search and rescue teams for lost hikers, and bartended in the evenings to save money for school.

During his stint at McMurdo, Pendleton participated in the highly publicized and risky airlift of Dr. Jerri Nielsen, the scientist diagnosed with breast cancer during a harsh Antarctic winter. “The main reason air traffic control personnel are there during the winters are for these types of emergencies,” he said. During the winter preceding Dr. Nielsen’s air rescue, Pendleton supported the airdrops of medications and equipment by de-winterizing air traffic control equipment and deploying equipment to the emergency landing airfield at McMurdo Station during a five-day blizzard.

Pendleton has been nominated for the Navy Distinguished Civilian Service Medal, which is currently under consideration, for his role in a similar emergency airlift. While recuperating from a broken leg one late Antarctic winter, Pendleton helped physically construct an ice runway for the successful rescue of a co-worker diagnosed with acute appendicitis.

As an air traffic control technician, Pendleton experienced intense pressure alleviated by incredible teamwork. “You learn to trust the people around you, because everything you do is instrumental. There is a tight-knit camaraderie, and there’s no half-stepping in the job. You do it right, because if you’re wrong, you will risk someone’s life.”

Slade Dukes
Statewide political campaign manager

Why would the campaign manager of a political candidate leading in the polls step down halfway through the campaign? For second-year student Slade Dukes, the answer was simple.

“I couldn’t postpone my education,” said Dukes, who spent three months with the 2002 campaign for Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist. However, in the short time Dukes spent with the Crist campaign, he helped raise approximately $700,000, surpassing the campaign’s goal by 40 percent and setting a record for state campaign fundraising in Florida.

Dukes’ career grew from humble beginnings mowing lawns during his high school years in the rural town of Hawthorne, Fla. Since then, he has held as many as five part-time jobs at any given time, ranging from driving school buses to computer programming for a law firm. All the while, Dukes has continued his full-time education, earning his associate’s, bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Santa Fe Community College and the University of Florida in Gainesville.

In 2002, Dukes was invited to return to his high school alma mater as commencement speaker, which he considers one of his great honors. “A lot of Hawthorne students think that there’s not a lot of opportunity if you graduate from there because it’s small and rural,” Dukes said. “It’s really about where you go with what you have, and not to let things hinder you.”

Dukes’ hiatus from full-time political life has not
diminished his enthusiasm for public service. “The biggest thing about politics is the potential for vast change. When the system does work, you can make changes that affect people on a mass level,” he said. Slade Dukes’ ultimate goal is to be a political candidate, and though he has the experience and education, he promises to never act as his own campaign manager.

“It’s like the old saying of the attorney who represents himself. He would have a fool for a client.”

**Cary Cash**

*Cancer survivor*

In 1998, Cary Cash was diagnosed with stage-four Hodgkin’s Lymphoma, a battle he conquered with courage and a positive attitude. He endured painful medical procedures, energy-draining chemotherapy treatments and life-threatening complications. However, cancer’s biggest challenge was not physical.

“Most of the fight against cancer is mental,” explained Cash, now a second-year student at Stetson. “Chemo not only strips your body of its hair and strength, but it also strips your mind. To fight the cancer and the chemo feeling, you must be totally strong, and you have to find ways to make yourself strong again.”

Before cancer, Cary Cash had curly blond hair and the goal of becoming a college archaeology professor. Cancer completely transformed his priorities and career goals. To gain perspective after his cancer went into remission, Cash spent eight months hiking the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine.

“Having cancer at 22 years old made me realize that I’ve got the tools and the desire to become a great, if not the best, advocate for people who are dealing with illnesses,” said Cash, who won the American Cancer Society’s Life Inspiration Award in 1999. Even before he finished his own nine-month treatment of chemotherapy, Cash began helping others in their fight against cancer as a volunteer counselor for Camp Smile-A-Mile, an Alabama camp for children diagnosed with cancer.

Now celebrating five years in remission, Cash hopes to apply his experience as a patient to a career in health law. Finding a home at Stetson, he serves as president of the Stetson Health Care Law Association and plans to earn a Certificate of Concentration in Health Law to accompany his J.D. degree. “I always keep the perspective that I’m in school, of all the great places to be,” said Cash, who enjoys playing tournament frisbee golf and riding his Harley Davidson with wife Deb in his spare time. “My worst day before a hard exam in law school is a whole lot better than my best day when I was on chemo.”

Cash will never completely end his fight against cancer. He continues to volunteer with Camp Smile-A-Mile, and he returns to his Birmingham oncologist for check-ups every four months. As a motivational speaker, he has been called on to cheer up newly diagnosed cancer patients and their families.

Cancer has left a permanent imprint on Cary Cash’s life, and he feels that he is a better person for it. “Cancer doesn’t mean the end; it means the beginning,” he reflected. “Ironically, it’s one of the best things that has ever happened to me. I never would have reached my full potential without it.”
creative aspects of the group's comeback, Stetson. Last year, as co-manager of the group 4Runner, Turner directed the comeback of a major country group. Now he hopes to blend his knowledge of the music industry with his Stetson legal education to start a career in entertainment law.

Any single facet of his young career is impressive, and his combined experience has generated invitations from musical artists around the country for Turner to manage their careers.

As a music business major at Belmont University in Nashville, Tenn., he worked for two years as a promoter for Warner Bros. Records, and managed the comeback of a major country group. Now he hopes to blend his knowledge of the music industry with his Stetson legal education to start a career in entertainment law.

Turner is now focused on completing his law degree and passing the bar exam, though he still performs with a praise band at a local church and is working with a Tampa concert fundraiser. He also clerks for the Tampa law firm of Older & Lundy LLC, which handles cases in entertainment law.

Meredith Phipps
Television actress and model

If you think you’ve seen Stetson Law Review editor Meredith Phipps before, you’re probably right. This high-achieving law student worked as a model and actress from middle school through her sophomore year at the University of Florida, appearing in national commercials, advertisements and billboards.

Phipps, who earned her Screen Actors Guild card after playing the lead role in a Round-Up Weed Killer commercial, says that her years of acting experience gave her the ability to work well with strong personalities at a young age.

“It’s tough being 16 and auditioning for people with massive egos, but you learn to live and work with them,” said Phipps. Audition experience and acting workshops with casting directors also helped her develop strong communication skills. A brief modeling course in middle school drew Phipps into the career as an after-school activity: “Instead of playing sports in school, I auditioned two to three times a week, like a job.”

Phipps’ other acting credits include ABC’s Second Noah and commercials for Toyota and Disney. She has also modeled for Disney, Verizon, and several department stores.

Phipps gave up acting and modeling in college to dedicate more time to academics, and after considering careers in engineering and information technology, she is enthusiastic about her future as an attorney. “The subject of the law is interesting, and it excites me that I will have a duty to help the public,” she said. “I have found what I enjoy doing, while some people search for 10 to 20 years and never find what they want to do.”

As a lifetime member of SAG, Phipps hasn’t ruled out a return to acting later in life. Meredith takes pride in living a well-rounded life; so don’t be surprised if you see her face again in the courtroom or on the small screen.

Vincent Petty
Disney character and attractions host

“Congratulations, Vincent Petty, you’ve just completed a rough week of law school! Where are you going next?”

He’s going to Disney World, but not in the way most might expect. To relax from the rigors of law school, second-year student Vin Petty doesn’t visit the parks as a guest; he would rather work there to entertain others.

“It clears my mind completely—it separates me from what I do here,” said Petty, who has played several Disney characters and currently works at the Tower of Terror in Disney/MGM Studios. “I can go from being a studious professional to just interacting with people so they have a great vacation away from the real world.”

A Connecticut native, Petty has worked at the resort as a seasonal employee since 1999, and it was Disney that attracted him to law school in Florida. After a few years of working in the parks division at Tower of Terror, he auditioned and earned a role as a Disney character performer.

“I love working there and bringing happiness to people’s lives, especially as the one thing that everyone wants to see when they visit,” said Petty, who has acted as four characters. “When you’re in costume, you’re not you—you are the character, and you learn the profile of that character to a ‘T.’”

Petty described his most rewarding experiences at Disney as the frequent visits by terminally ill children from the Give Kids the World organization. “My first week as a character, one of the kids ran up, gave me a hug, and said ‘I love you.’” His mom then said that she had not seen her child smile in two years, and that he only had two months to live. That makes everything worth it,” said Petty.

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