Summer, 1973. Opelika, Alabama, population 25,000. A 15-year-old boy named Joel Martin lies on his bed, escaping the afternoon heat in the air conditioned house. This boy is obsessed with reading, with learning, with self-improvement. He has just found a window into a different world. He is reading The New York Review of Books.

While he reads, he circles all of the words he doesn’t know. There are a lot of them: “venality,” “umbratile,” “concinnity.”

His older brother, Stan, is home from college, and he stops at Joel’s door. “Hey, what are you doing?” he asks.

“Trying to improve my vocabulary,” Joel replies.

* * *

It seems like Joel W. Martin was destined to become a professor. Opelika, his hometown, was small, but it was near a major center of learning, Auburn University. Martin loved school. He loved to learn, not just from books and magazines, but in the fields and forests, turning over logs and rocks to see what he could find. He also strove to hone his athletic skills, playing baseball in his home’s front yard and shooting hoops obsessively on the driveway.

Martin attended Alabama’s premier liberal arts college, Birmingham-Southern, winning a competitive scholarship and majoring in philosophy. He attended the Harvard Divinity School for a master’s degree. He earned a Ph.D. in the history of religions from Duke University.

But Martin always felt a need to connect his scholarship with current social problems. By following his instinct to use scholarly work to make a difference in today’s world, he also discovered he had a talent for academic administration.

All of which has led him to Wagner College, home of “the practical liberal arts,” to serve as its 19th president.

**Family Heritage**

Martin’s parents, Bill and Patty, grew up in farming families in rural Arkansas. Theirs was a hardscrabble life in financial terms, but rich in community and family relationships. Besides being a very hard worker, Bill was also a gifted baseball player. He even had a short professional
career as a pitcher, and it was baseball that took Bill and Patty to Opelika, Alabama. He played for two seasons for the Opelika Owls of the Georgia-Alabama League, and when that ended, they decided to stay.

Bill worked in tough, dirty jobs for a paper company and a tire plant. Still, he told his son, it was easier than farming. While working, Bill also managed to earn his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in physical education from Auburn University. He held jobs as a teacher and a gas station attendant. Patty oversaw the household until later in life, when she became a successful real estate agent. Bill passed away last year, but Patty is still living independently in Opelika.

Both of Martin’s parents fully supported their sons’ educational pursuits. Patty and her mother, in particular, loved to read. Joel’s brother, Stan, became a lawyer. He practices law in Opelika and also serves as the county attorney.

Times of Tension and Integration

As Joel Martin grew up, school integration was finally enforced in Alabama in the late 1960s, which had resisted so long under the influence of Governor George C. Wallace.

The white community of Opelika was unusual in its response to integration. Unlike the many Alabama communities where whites abandoned public schools for (nominally) private segregation academies, a group of white citizens in Opelika published an open letter in the town newspaper declaring their allegiance to the project of public education. Martin remembers having African American teachers in junior high school. By the time Martin reached high school, black and white students were being educated together.

This experience shaped him intellectually, he says. “It was a time of learning to relate to other people when there was a lot of tension in the air, as well as a lot of face to face sharing, forming a class together, going to school together, playing sports together, being in band together. It was a very powerful experience for an adolescent in that era. I also felt like we were part of a larger movement toward building a more just society, a truly democratic society. There was a lot of positive energy in it.

“It’s a disappointment to see that what looked like an emerging success got eroded over time,” he adds. “That’s one reason why Wagner is so important, because it creates the opportunity for people to learn how to live in a diverse environment, and encounter people from different backgrounds.”

A Scholar With a Mission

Beyond the story of blacks and whites in North America, Martin also grew up surrounded by the traces of a history even longer and older. “In Alabama, you can’t avoid at least a dim awareness of Native American history,” Martin says. The state of Alabama, after all, is named after the people who inhabited the area until the early 19th century. Opelika is a Muskogean word that means “big swamp.”
He also remembers taking a school trip to Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, 40 miles northwest of Opelika. There, he first learned about the bloody 1814 clash between the Muskogee tribe and federal troops, which played a pivotal role in the removal of Native Americans and expansion of slave plantations. Years later, this site became the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation and first book, Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees’ Struggle for a New World (Beacon Press, 1991).

The faculty at Birmingham-Southern College greatly influenced Martin’s trajectory. During his first semester, he took a philosophy seminar with O. C. Weaver Jr., a revered, longtime professor of philosophy and religion at BSC. He was assigned to teach a class on Plato to his fellow students. “By the end of that, I got hooked on philosophy, on teaching, on education,” he says. “The faculty had such an impact on me, because they were focused on the students, and you wanted to understand what they were so passionate about.”

After college, Martin thought he would follow his brother’s footsteps into the law, and he was even offered a fellowship to attend the law school at the University of Alabama. But another college mentor, religion scholar Earl F. Gossett Jr., had a connection to the Harvard Divinity School. With Gossett’s help and encouragement, he was accepted at Harvard for a Master in Theological Studies and chose to go there instead of law school.

While deepening his knowledge of religions, Harvard still didn’t offer quite what Martin was looking for. “Studying religion for the sake of religion alone felt a little bit arid,” he says. “I needed a context, I needed something grounded. I needed a problem to deal with.”

He headed back to the South, but this time to Duke University in North Carolina. That university and the nearby University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill offer unparalleled resources for the study of Southern folklore, history, and religions. “I just ate it all up, it was a smorgasbord,” Martin recalls. It was the place where he was able to unite his love for the South, his concern for the problems of society, and his interests in research and scholarship.

As he considered his dissertation topic, he wanted to carve out a niche in Southern historical studies beyond the well-worn field of the Civil War. Recalling the landscape of his childhood, he looked farther back into the history of the Southern region, to the people who lived there before European colonization.

He settled upon a study of the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, or Tohopeka (as it was known to the Muskogee) — from the Native Americans’ perspective. What had motivated 1,000 Muskogee fighters to defy the United States, facing overwhelming odds? At least 80 percent of them died, making this battle the bloodiest for Native Americans in the history of warfare between Native Americans and the United States.

Martin used religion as a lens for understanding the Muskogee perspective. He also argued that this battle is a key to understanding United States history. It led to a treaty that opened millions of acres to the white population, enabling the creation of vast plantations and prompting the expansion of slavery.
“Telling this story was a work of passion,” he writes in the preface. “I was concerned about hidden and repressed dimensions of American history, and subjugated populations and knowledges.”

In 1991, the Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights named Sacred Revolt to its list of Outstanding Books on the Subject of Human Rights. (Read about his other books in “A Joel W. Martin Bibliography.”)

**Listening and Respecting**

In 1988, Martin had become a professor at the elite, historic liberal arts college Franklin and Marshall in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He taught, published articles and two more books, and became the department chair.

But in 2000, he left that job, seeking greater opportunities to make a difference in society. He moved across the country to the University of California Riverside, where a group of Native American tribes had established and generously funded the Costo Endowed Chair in American Indian Affairs, the first position of this type ever in the US. Martin was the first permanent holder of the Costo Chair.

Finding himself in an unprecedented position, as well as being an outsider in a new place and a new culture, Martin says he proceeded by showing respect, listening, and “saying yes to any invitation.”

Over the next six years, he worked on a number of projects that coordinated the goals of tribal leaders with academic experts. He located historical photos and restored them to the community they came from. He developed a program to train tribal members as land development monitors, with the aim of protecting archaeological heritage and sacred sites. He established a project to preserve and revitalize the use of Native American languages. He produced a study on the impacts of gaming on tribes’ economies and cultures.

One day, he received a phone call from the university’s chancellor, France Cordova, who is now the director of the National Science Foundation. She surprised him by saying that she was looking for someone to serve as the interim dean of the College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences — and she wondered if he would be interested.

So began Martin’s trajectory in high-level college administration. As he said, “It wasn’t the goal; I never aspired to become the dean of a college. But, there is an arc to my journey. I was moving toward mobilizing universities and colleges to have a positive impact on society. Along the way I developed a skill set to help create coalitions around problems that matter.

“The reason I was successful working with communities where there was no trust is that I approached each community with deep respect.”

**Land Grants**
Martin was the interim dean at UC Riverside for two years. In 2006, he landed a permanent position as dean of the College of Humanities and Fine Arts at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Martin points out that both UC Riverside and UMass Amherst are land-grant universities, founded with the purpose of bringing academic knowledge into practical service of the community. “I’m always drawn to universities that try to make a difference and have that practical side,” he says.

During his years in Amherst, Martin’s interest in the land, in the literal sense, led to an important personal development in his life. He had always loved to garden, and he had a large property at his home in Amherst. He was also looking for ways to become more involved in the community, so he decided to start a master gardening certification program.

One Saturday, his master gardening class went on a tree tour in Childs Park in Northampton, Massachusetts. There he encountered Jan de Ubl, a science teacher at White Brook Middle School in Easthampton, who had joined the tour seeking more knowledge that she could share with her students.

He asked her out for coffee. On their second date, they went to the Garlic and Arts Festival in Orange, Massachusetts. They married in 2015.

Becoming a President

Listening to others, showing respect, and bringing groups together are qualities that many people have seen in Martin, as he continued serving in academic leadership positions.

Jim Staros, then-provost of UMass Amherst, was impressed with Martin’s work as a dean. When Staros needed to hire a vice provost for academic personnel in 2010, he recruited Martin. “He is a gifted negotiator, because he’s a great listener,” Staros says. He highlights Martin’s excellent work with a major donor, who made a $2.8 million gift to establish the Endowed Chair in Nonviolent Direct Action and Civil Resistance. Then, Martin led an international search to fill the position. “This is a guy who has presidency in him,” Staros thought at the time.

But, before Martin got to that point, he returned to Franklin and Marshall College in 2014 to serve as the provost and dean of the faculty. F&M’s president at the time was Dan Porterfield, who is now serving as president of the Aspen Institute.

Porterfield says Martin stood out as a provost candidate for several reasons: “his extraordinary vision for the importance of higher education, his career of exemplary scholarship, his record of distinction as an academic administrative leader, and his genial, approachable personality.”

Porterfield highlights several successful initiatives that Martin led at Franklin and Marshall: the master planning for a visual arts quad and construction of a visual arts center; an effort to diversify the faculty and make pedagogy more inclusive, funded by an $800,000 grant from the Mellon Foundation; and the establishment of a Center for Lancaster to develop research partnerships between the college and its home community.
“It’s exciting to work with an academic leader who’s great at getting things done,” says Porterfield. He still remembers what Martin said at his inaugural town hall as provost in 2014. “He made a comment that the intersection of aspiration and realism is where strategy lives. I thought that was a very insightful perspective on academic leadership, and also a very helpful way to frame the process of strategic development at the college and among the faculty.”

In 2017, Joel and Jan Martin joined the Presidential Vocation and Institutional Mission program of the Council of Independent Colleges. Among their mentors in that program were Joel and Trudy Cunningham. Joel Cunningham retired after serving as president of two liberal arts colleges, Susquehanna University and the University of the South.

“Joel Martin is a superb listener, a person who cares deeply about students, faculty and staff and is eager to support the development of individuals to achieve their full potential,” Cunningham says. “He will bring a good-humored, thoughtful ability to find direction from listening to others, helping the College to move ahead smoothly and well.”

For his part, Martin defines his work at Franklin and Marshall as “infusing some of the land grant DNA” of making a difference to society into a traditional liberal arts college. Wagner’s “practical liberal arts” focus, therefore, seemed like the perfect fit for him, a place where his lifelong interests in scholarship and service to society are deeply intertwined.

“We have found our family,” Martin said to the Wagner community on the day that the trustees announced his selection as president-elect. “One of the faculty members on the search committee even said that to us when we walked in today. She said, ‘Welcome home.’ And I felt like that was the absolute truth. We feel that way about Wagner.”

“What do we want to do in our first 100 days at Wagner?” he continued. “We want to get to know each and every one of you. … Working together, I don’t think there’s anything we can’t do.”

**Editor’s note:** This article was first published the Wagner College alumni magazine in early August 2019. It is reprinted here with permission from Wagner College.