

Endeavors engages its readers in the intellectual life of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill by conveying the excitement of creativity, discovery, and the rigors and risks of the quest for new knowledge.

Endeavors (ISSN 1933-4338) is published three times a year by the Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Economic Development at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Holden Thorp, Chancellor

Bruce Carney, Executive Vice Chancellor and Provost

Barbara Entwisle, Interim Vice Chancellor, Research and Economic Development

Karen Regan, Associate Vice Chancellor for Research

Send comments, requests for permission to reprint material, and requests for extra copies to:

Endeavors
Office of Information and Communications
CB 4106, 307 Bynum Hall
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-4106
phone: (919) 962-6136
e-mail: endeavors@unc.edu

Editor: Jason Smith

Writers in this issue: Mark Derewicz, Ramona DuBose, Susan Hardy, Ginnie Hench, Tom Hughes, Lee Langer, Margarite Nathe, Alex Raines, Jason Smith, Meagen Voss, and Noor White

Magazine design, production, and website:
Jason Smith

On the cover: Your birthdays may be coming more—or less—often than you think. Photo by Donn Young.

<http://research.unc.edu/endeavors/>

©2010 by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in the United States. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced without the consent of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Use of trade names implies no endorsement by UNC-Chapel Hill. The Office of Technology Development is the only UNC-Chapel Hill office authorized to execute license agreements with companies. For information on licensing, reporting inventions, and technology transfer at UNC-Chapel Hill, contact OTD at 919-966-3929.

My grandfather gave me this wallet. He bought it, like most of the presents he gave for Christmas, at a flea market. The leather inside is dyed bright red. The outside is stitched together with some kind of plastic cord. When it was new, two cowboy boots were embossed into the leather on one side. The other side had a pony. Both sides are worn smooth now.

My grandfather used to make up stories about a little red Volkswagen Beetle that outwitted a mean black Cadillac. He would pay for our McDonald's Happy Meals with exact change: handing the cashier the coins, he'd say, "Here's your cost," and then—forking over the bills—"and here's your profit." He didn't say hello when he answered the phone. He'd just announce his name, *James*, as if the caller should get down to business. He would say that his garden was doing pretty well, but the macaroni he planted still hadn't come up.

He gave me the wallet when I was eighteen or nineteen. I've carried it every day since. It was in my right front pocket the day I helped carry his coffin from the funeral home to the hearse, and from the hearse to his grave. We unpinned the carnations from our lapels and left them on the lid of his coffin. He was eighty-



eight. In the last few years of his life he'd struggled with diabetes, a bladder infection, kidney stones. He had elevated levels of the marker for prostate cancer, but because of his age, the doctors decided not to investigate. One day a diabetic coma put him in the hospital. The doctors there found more

and more things that were going wrong. They said he'd likely had several small heart attacks and not realized it. The prostate cancer had probably spread. They gave him a pacemaker, but he wouldn't need it for long.

Eighty-eight may be ripe enough, as old age goes. Would he have lived longer if he ate better? Was all that black coffee good for him? Did he wait too long to give up cigars? What if he could have taken some kind of blood test years ago to see how his body would react to getting older? Or to see whether he'd make a good candidate for a particular kind of prostate cancer treatment? Would he want to know? Would we?

The wallet is starting to fall apart. Receipts and little slips of paper sometimes fall out through the cracks in the leather. When money and credit cards start to slip out, I'll probably have to retire it. For now, though, I'll keep it right here in my right front pocket.

—Jason Smith

