

Catalyst Profile
John Rodgers

Before tapping into oil in the ultra-deep waters of the Gulf of Mexico, John Rodgers, the WCU alumnus of 1978, did a bit of groundwork. For seven years, the burgeoning geologist laid a foundation of metamorphic petrology, sedimentation and paleontology in Cullowhee.

As an undergraduate and graduate at WCU, Rodgers formed a “solid base to build upon.” Approaching geology from the “planetary and petroleum” perspectives, he gleaned “diverse information” from his courses, much of which has stayed with him throughout his career.

“The more you study, the better prepared you will be for what lies ahead,” he advised, pushing current students to “take as many classes as possible.”

Though each professor was “instrumental” in launching his career, the lectures of a select few continue to resonate with Rodgers.

During his academic pursuits, Tom Wilcox, cultural and regional geography specialist, introduced Rodgers to optical mineralogy and economic geology. Meanwhile, Steven Yurkovich, Appalachian mafic and ultramafic rock enthusiast, offered guidance in petrology.

The pair’s mentorship helped the alumnus earn acceptance to the University of Houston’s Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, where he began pursuing his doctorate. in both petroleum geology and planetary geology. The latter, which focuses on celestial bodies, was undertaken with Apollo 17 astronaut Harrison Schmidt in mind.

During the early to mid-1980s, Rodgers applied to NASA’s Astronaut Candidate Program. When his application was turned down, however, he began working as a geo-tech for an oil company. There, the aspiring astronaut-turned-driller soon earned the title of “exploration geologist” after becoming a “proven oil finder.”

“Generating oil prospects in the Gulf of Mexico is almost as exciting to me as flying combat in the Vietnam War,” said Rodgers. “It’s one of the best things I’ve ever done.”

Now, after over 30 years working offshore, Rodgers is approaching retirement age. Though his thrills of drilling must soon come to an end, he now revels in the prospects of younger geologists striking oil.

“Geology students at WCU are just now going down their paths,” he said, “And new discoveries are just ahead. Who knows where this will take them.”