

**Citation for the 2009 Thomas Jefferson Award Winner  
George Lensing, Jr.**

*Written by Prof. Joseph Flora*

Like Thomas Jefferson when he left the White House, George Lensing can look back over a career that has balanced intellectual curiosity and acumen, facility with the written and spoken word, exemplary public service, and gracious hospitality. For both Jefferson and Lensing, high moral ideals not only framed their actions but inspired their constituents. Jefferson's words in the Declaration of Independence still urge the nation to live its creed. Shaped by a similar commitment to liberty and justice, Lensing has exemplified transcendent values and concern for the least among us.

Among Jefferson's proudest claims was the founding of the University of Virginia. In the early years of the republic, none surpassed Jefferson in promoting "schools and the means of education" as essential to the welfare of the nation. Lensing has similarly focused on a vision for a well-educated citizenry. Building on the solid foundation of his bachelor's degree from Notre Dame, Lensing entered graduate school at Louisiana State. Four years later, Ph.D. in hand, he joined the Peace Corps, and became a visiting professor at the Universidade Federal do Estado Do Rio de Janeiro. He had been swift to answer the challenge that another president, John F. Kennedy, had put forth. Like Jefferson, Lensing pushed literal as well as figurative boundaries.

Having served as governor of Virginia, having served as diplomat in France, having served as president of the nation, Jefferson rejoiced finally in returning to his native Albemarle County. He could be near "his university." Having completed his Peace Corps work, Lensing accepted an appointment at the nation's first public university. In time, Orange County, North Carolina, would become his Albemarle County, and UNC-Chapel Hill "his" university. Success in the classroom was immediate, and savvy administrators quickly surmised that Lensing had a gift for working with colleagues as well. First in the Department of English, then in upper reaches of the administration, Lensing was pressed into numerous service assignments. Notable among them for the Department was lengthy service as director of junior-senior English. The assignment that Lensing most prizes in the Department is directing the English Honors Program. No matter the additional service commitment he would assume—including Secretary of the Faculty and, as currently, Director of the Office of Distinguished Scholarships—he has continued to direct the Honors Program. Tellingly, he has not sought released time for administrative work; he loves teaching too much. Few have served in so many posts, so ably, asking not what the Department, the College, the University could do for him!

Not surprisingly, the University has recognized Lensing's outstanding record in the classroom with numerous teaching awards: a Tanner Award and a Gordon and Bowman Gray Professorship. What could be more fitting than his receiving the John Sanders Award, an award celebrating excellence in teaching and service? It should be pointed out that affection for Lensing in the classroom never resulted from compromised standards. If grade inflation is a problem, Lensing is not responsible for it. His students know that they must write papers of high quality and face challenging examinations. He will penalize students who do not attend class. And, being like Jefferson an early-riser, he regularly elects to teach at 8 a.m.!

No surprise, the effective classroom teacher has also had great success as a public speaker. He regularly gives papers at professional meetings. Increasingly in recent years, he has been invited to speak abroad. On our campus, he has spoken to acclaim for the Program in the Humanities for the Study of Human Values, including the prestigious annual Maynard Adams Lecture. No doubt, the biggest audience to hear Lensing speak occurred in December 2004, when he delivered the commencement address. Lensing's record on the platform, we must note, is that arena where he clearly outshines Jefferson, who was not particularly effective as a speaker.

But Jefferson could write, and he cared greatly about books. No American from Jefferson's time surpassed him as reader or writer. Lensing would not claim the same for himself in his time, but there is no doubt that he is proficient with the word and a constant reader, and not just as it relates to his field. He may be reading a novel by one of the giants that he had missed in graduate school, or he may be reading the latest Booker prize-winner. When he is not teaching or conferring with students or colleagues, he is usually in his library carrel reading or writing. There is always work-in-progress. His curriculum vitae recounts his many fine critical essays and points to acclaimed books on the poet Wallace Stevens. Like Jefferson, Lensing looks for the next intellectual challenge—the lamp in the study glows with purpose.

And like Jefferson, Lensing gives all due attention to the art of living. He is frequently a gracious host to friends, colleagues, and students. His students make sure that he receives many wedding invitations, and he attends a good many of these happy events. He's a godfather to many, literally and metaphorically. And he also serves the stranger as well. His curriculum vitae details his busy life as a faculty member. We can assure you that an accounting of his service to the community, to the stranger, the lonely, the forgotten is also impressive.

We know that we have many colleagues in the University who inspire with their scholarship and service, colleagues who share many traits with Thomas Jefferson. We can, however, think of none more deserving of UNC's Thomas Jefferson Award than George S. Lensing.