

Pennix helps open his 'home' to others



Player Pennix in 1987.

Last year, **James Pennix '88**, or J.P. as he's affectionately known on campus, celebrated his 20th year associated with Roanoke College. In 1984, a skinny, but athletic Pennix chose to attend Roanoke over schools like Davidson and James Madison and joined the men's basketball team. Pennix still ranks in the top 10 in three different statistical categories in Roanoke history, and he is 17th in all-time scoring.

The Madison Heights, Va., native joined the Navy Reserve his sophomore year, and two years after earning his bachelor's in mathematics he served in the Persian Gulf War. He returned to Roanoke College in 1998 as an assistant coach with the hoops. After three years on the sidelines, Pennix, who also had earned a master's degree in social work from Radford University, moved over to Roanoke's Admissions Department, where he has been since. Pennix is one of three associate directors for the department and plays a vital role in bringing students to campus and making it feel a little more like home.

RC: You wear a lot of hats at Roanoke. What do you consider your 'real' job?

JP: Besides counselor, mentor and friend on campus, my primary job is to recruit kids from the Virginia area, outside of the Roanoke Valley. I maintain contacts with guidance counselors at all of the high schools, make presentations, do college fairs, schedule open houses, overnights visits. Anything a student needs to know about Roanoke, I'm there. The ideal situation would be to get kids to visit first, apply and then

deposit. . . . I'm also in charge of Lutheran recruitment and multicultural recruitment, which is very important on all college campuses.

RC: Multicultural affairs at Roanoke is near to your heart. It seems like it has been a second job since you've been here.

JP: It's been my baby. When I was in grad school and working as an assistant basketball coach, I served as the graduate intern for multicultural affairs. I'm still involved in that and mentoring some of the kids. I continue to recruit the kids, but I also help nurture them when they get here.

You could see it was a big need. . . . The kids needed a place where they could go and feel at home, just talk about personal issues. A lot of times kids struggle with academics, and that's all kids, but I think a lot of times with minority students, they just want someone they can talk with to be straight and honest with them.

RC: How did you fit into those early plans for a multicultural office?

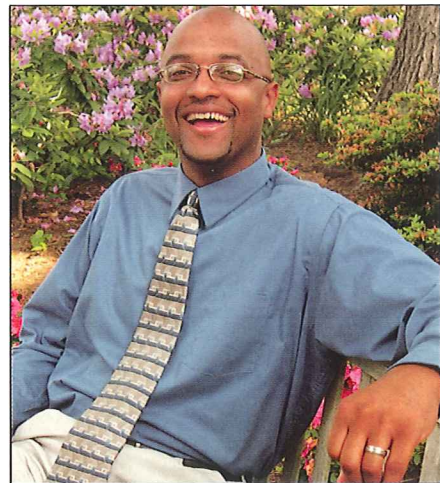
JP: It was an easy fit because I had been through the process as a student. It also was natural for me because at the time, I lived on campus so kids would see me at dinner and ask me if they could come by and talk.

RC: Has the situation changed much since you were a student?

JP: You can see a big difference on Alumni Weekend. My connection to Roanoke has always been basketball, and a lot of times kids who aren't involved with something like that, especially minority kids, did not have a lot of connections and did not come back on Alumni Weekend. Now, you see a lot more minority students who aren't athletes coming back on Alumni Weekend. Since the multicultural office was formed, you see those kids coming back just to see each other and staying connected to Roanoke College.

RC: So what do you enjoy most about your work?

JP: Just being on campus with the students I've helped get here makes things worthwhile. You see these kids going through major changes, and if I have the chance, I like to help them out



Pennix on campus today.

while they're here. It's kind of like social work but on a different level than most people think. The kids need someone to guide them, so they come to you for advice. You see them winning championships, in a play or a production. You're there for them. It's funny, though, how maintaining those relationships helps me in getting new students to campus. . . . When I go back to their high school, I'm able to tell what they're doing here. It's amazing how many times I get an e-mail from a kid who decides to come and they'll say, "What really impressed me is that you knew this person that I've known my whole life."

RC: You've been a big part of Roanoke since you first came here in '84, but you left for a while. What brought you back?

JP: I was at a fork in the road. Sometimes you have to make that decision to make a lot of money in the business world or do something you enjoy. . . . I was mentoring kids after my regular job as a salesman, so there wasn't really too much of a change that way. But to come back and coach hoops at Roanoke and get a degree (at Radford), I couldn't have asked for too much more.

RC: So, why are you still here 21 years after you first walked onto the campus?

JP: While most of my friends go off to work, I always say, 'I go to fun.' Roanoke College, like Madison Heights, will always be a big part of who I am. I've grown and learned so much here that it's great to be able to give back to the campus community. It is home.