

When Ross Baird '03 learned late last fall that he had been named a Marshall Scholar—one of just 43 students at American colleges and universities chosen for the prestigious scholarship, which will take him to Oxford University for two years to study comparative politics—his immediate reaction, he says, was relief.

“I thought, ‘Whew! That takes care of what I’ll be doing next year,’” Baird, now in his final year at the University of Virginia, says with a laugh. “That’s a subject of some concern to college seniors.”

Baird may have been the only person who was worried about his next act. That he would go on to do not only great things, but also challenging, meaningful and just plain fun things was clear to almost everyone who knew him during his two years at Exeter. “Ross was not only an exceptional student, he was just an exceptional kid,” recalls his adviser, Dean of Students Ethan Shapiro. “He always worked incredibly hard, but he always seemed to get a lot of joy out of everything he did.”

“When you’re doing things you really like, you don’t feel busy,” says the Georgia native. “You just feel excited.” And so at Exeter he was secretary of the senior class and head of the Democratic Club; a proctor in Browning House and editor of *The Exonian*; an avid Greek and Latin scholar who graduated with a classical diploma; an early Cum Laude inductee, a Cox Medalist and the recipient of UVA’s Jefferson Scholarship, which covered his entire undergraduate education.

Nor did his pace slacken once he arrived at Charlottesville. He is currently president of both the senior class and the university’s honor society, a fellow at the Center for the Study of the Presidency and, thanks to his status as a Jefferson Scholar, a resident of “The Lawn,” the original portion of the UVA campus, which was designed by Jefferson himself.

Finally, lest anyone forget, Baird would like it to be known that he was also captain of Exeter’s club golf team. “When the Marshall application requested relevant leadership experience, I made sure to list that,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m pretty sure that’s what won me the scholarship.”

Asked for comment, club golf coach A.J. Cosgrove doesn’t disagree. “Ross organized tournaments, led conversations on the club golf van and basically had a great time interacting with everyone,” says Cosgrove, a chemistry instructor. “Ross’ passion for politics often took center stage during our trips to and from the Amesbury 9-hole course, and there were a couple of times that I became so engrossed that I missed the turn.”

And then there was the time that Cosgrove jokingly suggest-

ed that Baird use his political skills to draft a constitution for the club golf team. “Within a week, I had a nine-page document with recommendations for club golf etiquette, captain’s duties, regulations for tournament play and rules of order for discussions in the club golf van. It was incredibly funny, but also well organized, well written and incredibly thorough.”

These same qualities have made a strong impression on Baird’s UVA professors. Brian Balogh, the Mayo Distinguished Teaching Professor in the history department, has described Baird as “one of the most talented students I have worked with at UVA. He is truly distinguished, combining intellectual curiosity and terrific scholarship with a nuts-and-bolts feel for politics.” Balogh predicts that Baird might one day become governor of

Georgia, adding he would be “the best-read and most-informed governor Georgia has ever had.”

Prognostications aside, Baird says he arrived at UVA fully intending to become a classics major.

“At Exeter, I took four courses with Dick Morante in two years,” he says. The Arthur L. Endicott Class of 1890 Distinguished Professor and a member of Exeter’s classics department for more than 45 years, Morante is known for his exacting standards and his

impatience with those who fail to meet them—which was just fine by Baird. “He never let me get away with anything but my best, and that’s been incredibly influential,” Baird recalls.

Also influential, he says, were his Harkness class experiences. “Harkness teaches you to listen to a variety of perspectives and then to consider what you think. That’s exactly what a politician does.” At UVA, he has made listening to different perspectives a focal point of his research into voter turnout, using research grants to travel to Europe and to Georgia to talk with citizens about their attitudes towards the political process.

“Ross could talk to anybody,” recalls Ethan Shapiro, “whether it was a bunch of 8-year-old boys or a group of senior citizens. That may sound like a politician, but Ross is entirely genuine. He would always take an interest in who you were and what you were doing. At his core, he’s interested in people.”

Baird is looking forward to continuing his research into voter participation at Oxford, home to some of the world’s leading authorities on the subject. “A couple of professors I’ll be studying under are involved in a project to rewrite the constitution of the European Union,” he says. “It’s a transformatively important civic project”—and one that could no doubt put all Baird’s well-honed club golf talents to full use. ●



FRED CARLSON