If, on a weekday afternoon, you happen to wander into the Reynolds Building, the old tobacco-warehouse-turned-art-studio-space on UK’s campus, you might run into a thin, gray-haired art professor wearing Levi’s and boots.

“Hi, I’m Bones,” he’ll say. That’s right—Bones. Not Dennis. And please, not Professor Carpenter. He prefers Bones, whether you’re a friend, a colleague, a student, or even a university president.

Why Bones? The answer traces back to his eighth-grade year, when he earned the nickname by being the skinniest kid in his class. “The nickname stuck, and I like it. It’s easy to remember, non-threatening, and disarming,” he says.

Dennis “Bones” Carpenter, who has taught photography courses at UK since 1973, describes himself as a maximalist. “I want my students to embrace complexity and follow their curiosity wherever it leads them.”

By David Wheeler

Getting Down to the Bare Bones

Longtime art professor has a simple formula: embrace complexity

True enough, but soon after meeting Bones, you realize you’ve been tricked. The name, combined with his nondescript outfit of jeans, a denim shirt, and a wristwatch with no numbers on it, suggests meagerness. Simplicity. But this first impression belies something deeper. It hides, for a moment, a primary reason he has been revered by his students from the time he taught his first photography course here in 1973. Whereas some artists describe themselves as “minimalists,” Bones calls himself a “maximalist.” What students learn from Bones is not how to simplify their lives or their art, but rather how to embrace complexity and follow their curiosity wherever it leads them. “I want my students to realize art is a lot more complicated than it first appears,” says Bones.
In the Classroom

One Wednesday afternoon in the fall, several photography students walk across the creaky floorboards of the Reynolds Building and gather to critique each other’s photos. First up are photographs by Ariel Chollet, a senior majoring in art studio in the bachelor of fine arts program. Her photo series features a 12-year-old girl and her friends. These photos, which follow the girls around at a Halloween party, have a mysterious, almost unsettling quality. One photo features a girl wearing a way-too-big-for-her fur coat and sunglasses. “You’re knocking on Diane Arbus’ door,” Bones says, referring to the well-known New York photographer whose work usually focused on people on the fringes of society.

“I don’t think you’re finished with this yet,” he asserts, by which he means there is more complexity in her subject waiting to be explored. He suggests that Chollet capture her subject in as many environments—both physical and social—as possible. “The best way to show the uniqueness of something is to juxtapose it with its opposite,” Bones says, legs crossed, leaning back in a 30-year-old chair with tattered orange upholstery.

Chollet later notes that this type of prodding by her teacher has helped her grow as an artist. “Bones taught me to make my art more complex by showing me the power of shifting the spotlight away from the star,” she explains. “In essence, not to push what is already apparent to the viewer but to pinpoint the details that make a picture evocative. In doing so, I was forced to learn how to look within myself and feel what there was about the scene that needed to be captured.”

“My art is all-consuming; it’s a way of life. There aren’t enough hours in the day for me to explore everything I want to explore.”

—Dennis “Bones” Carpenter

an MFA in photography at the University of Florida, he earned an architecture degree from UK. “My architecture training affects my world view, without a doubt,” he says. “In order to do well in architecture, you have to embrace complexity and organization. I don’t make a huge distinction between the way one approaches designing a building and the way one approaches making photographs.”

Computer Art

Bones was a pioneer in another arena that thrives on complexity: creating art with a computer. “Bones was one of the first people I knew who was incorporating image-making with the use of the computer,” says Aimee Tomasek, who studied photography with him as an MFA student in the 1990s and is now a faculty member in the art department at Valparaiso University. “When he first started utilizing this equipment, you had to be very well versed as a computer technician in order to make any of it work for you. There was no Adobe Photoshop in those days. He was very much on the cutting edge.”

One of Bones’ computer-created works, inspired by a trip to Costa Rica, involves multiple layers: maps of the country, photos of a fishing trip, images of fish, and nautical shells, among other things. Lee Thomas, a Lexington-based commercial photographer and former student of Bones, admires his ability to create complexity through layers. “His photographic canvas is of two dimensions layered with imagery of two and three dimensions,” Thomas says. “This creates intertwining foreground, mid-ground and background. For the viewer it creates motion and depth to look at, around and through. And then there’s the mystery of the image’s intent and meaning.”

A Healthy (Artistic) Curiosity

When you walk into Bones’ home, the first thing you’re likely to notice are many bookcases, all crammed full of books. The authors housed there include Descartes and Dante, and subjects range from investment strategies to world travel. Bones thinks good art can come from inspirational sources other than visual art, and he describes the work of a friend, Robert May, who made photographs with multiple exposures that resulted in “herky-jerky” images.

“Heavy inspiration for the images,” says Bones, “was a love of Robert Frost’s poetry, symphonic music, and the
organ music of Bach. Musicians viewing his work might sense its muses, but most casual observers would not get it until the artist pointed it out.” May, Bones adds, was a great supporter of the arts, making one of the largest bequests ever to the UK Art Museum, which sponsors a lecture series in his name.

Bones brings this cross-fertilization of the arts into the classroom. “In my first photography class with him, he thought it might open our artistic minds to read something creative, so our required reading was Tom Robbins’ Wild Ducks Flying Backward—a collection of short stories, essays and poems,” says former student Lee Ann Paynter, who is now pursuing an MFA in the photography and media program at the California Institute for the Arts. “Most of the class expressed some sort of dismay in the beginning. But discussions proved insightful and intriguing. It opened up territories of ideas, which led me personally to dig deeper into a project that I’m still working on.”

Paynter says Bones’ curiosity causes him to constantly seek knowledge in its many forms. “He has an appreciation for intelligent humor and wit, and a real love of language—all things that are well crafted.”

“My art is all-consuming; it’s a way of life,” Bones says. “I’m baffled when I hear about people who retire and don’t know what to do with themselves—people who need to be entertained all the time. That’s foreign to me. There are not enough hours in the day for me to explore everything I want to explore.”