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Novelist to deliver address

Florida State graduation

By Melanie Yeager
DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Florida State University's commencement speaker today has been living the student life of all-nighters.

Mark Winegardner, novelist and English professor, has been glued to his laptop, putting the finishing touches on the sequel to Mario Puzo's 1969 best seller, "The Godfather."

It's been a mad dash for Winegardner since Random House announced in February last year that he would write "The Godfather Returns," slated for release this fall.

He's spent whole months at artist colonies. He's spent weeks hibernating in his stand-alone office in his Betton Hills back yard. He's found the perfect caffeine cocktails to keep going until sunrise several times a week. And he's lost about 35 pounds.

"I used to have a life," Winegardner, 42, said. "I have friends, three kids and a wife. I believe they're still around here somewhere."

So it's little wonder that this week Winegardner was still mulling over the perfect words he'll use today to jump-start graduates into life after college.

Should he offer the wise words from his grandfather, a semi-professional gambler? Should he use the moment to point out how politics has become too much about polarizing views instead of common causes? Or, should he inspire them to invest fully in their wildest ambitions, even if it defies common sense?

"Anytime you speak, you want people to be entertained," Winegardner said. "Nobody ever remembers the graduation speech unless it's bad or too long, which is a more intense version of bad."

Lee Hinkle, FSU vice president for university relations, said FSU's top administrative team asked Winegardner to speak because he's a distinguished scholar.

"We wanted our students to see someone who's successful and who's brought the university acclaim," Hinkle said.

Winegardner said he is honored. "It's one of those situations in life where you feel you must have been mistaken for somebody else."

He remembers what was going through his mind when he graduated magna cum laude from Miami (Ohio) University.

"I had a big fat wad of debt. My parents' business had failed. I was definitely freaking out about money," he said. "But it never occurred to me to do anything just for money."

He went on to graduate school, earning a master's degree in fiction writing from George Mason University.

He hopes today's graduates have already learned one of the key lessons of his past: That education is not about making good grades.

"I got good grades, and I was a terrible student. I was a terrible student because I got good grades. I started college caring about grades because I thought they mattered," he said.

But, he said, what's the use of grades if someone doesn't take advantage of all a state school like Florida State University has to offer? As a self-described "state school mutt," Winegardner said he's proof that anyone can grow up in a trailer, as he did the first years of his life in Ohio, and gain access through public universities to "study with preposterously great people."

"Grade-grubbing students do tend to wake up to the folly of their ways," he said. "Like a reformed smoker, I hate them. I hate them because they are me."

He never dreamed of writing books as a child. Aside from some small-town journalists in Bryan, Ohio, he never knew any writers. They were in the same categories as astronauts, porn stars and rodeo clowns: Professions known to exist, but not in his reality, he said. He set out to teach instead.

"Teaching came really naturally. Writing comes hard for me," he said. "I'm a slow writer ... glacial."

But once he began, he just kept going. He published his first book, "Elvis Presley Boulevard: From Sea to Shining Sea, Almost" at age 26. His last novel, "Crooked River Burning" (2001), captured the interest of Jonathan Karp, an editor at Random House. "The Godfather" sequel will be Winegardner's ninth novel.

Through the years, Winegardner has stayed with academia, teaching at George Mason, George Washington and John Carroll universities. FSU hired him to direct its creative writing program in 1997.

"FSU has had a splendid creative writing program for a long time. When Mark arrived and became director of the program, he enlarged the stage and then proceeded to populate it with additional stars, not the least of whom is Mark himself," said Donald Foss, dean of the FSU's College of Arts and Sciences.

Weinberger's been on sabbatical this past school year as he creates the continued story of the famous Mafia characters. The first book, which became a classic movie, sold 20 million copies.

"I am looking forward to a godfather who will make me want to turn the pages as fast as bullets, but who will also slow me down so I can savor the artistry of the writing," Foss said.

Winegardner spent five years writing "Crooked River Burning," a project that was 50-100 manuscript pages longer than this one.

"But I bet I spent the same number of hours in a little less than two years," he said.

Winegardner is usually a man of many tasks.

"As far as historical figures go, Mark is closest to the 12th-century Sicilian king Roger II, of whom it was said that he accomplished more while asleep than other sovereigns did in their waking hours," said David Kirby, his good friend and fellow English professor at FSU. "Mark is usually doing three things - three huge things - at once, yet when you talk to him, he's usually chattering about the seven future projects he's got in mind. The man's energy just seems inexhaustible to me."

The past few weeks have been the most intense as he makes final changes for Random House. It's a pile of paper that will be shipped back soon and eventually bound into a hardback. Soon the book's preliminary promotion will begin.

Not soon enough for Winegardner. He's ready to stop the auto-reply e-mail apology that says he's "under the gun on my deadline." He's ready for some shut-eye, still stunned by his own sleep-depriving efforts to accomplish the task at hand.

Said Winegardner: "Panic's a good motivator."

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