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Tar Heel of the Week:

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Activist grooms the rich for a cause

G.D. GEARINO, Staff Writer

CHAPEL HILL - Four years ago, a UNC alumnus named Andrew Pearson ran onto the court of the Smith Center during a televised basketball game and unfurled a banner protesting the war in Iraq. It was a minor bit of protest theater, for which Pearson was charged with a minor crime and slapped with a minor punishment.

Pearson didn't do that again. Won't do it again.

The firebrand activist, the instinctive, reflexive organizer of progressive movements and street demonstrations, has put on a coat and tie -- figuratively speaking. The impetuous young man who just a few years ago would dare to interrupt an ACC basketball game (in North Carolina! In the Dean Dome itself!) advises other well-to-do young people these days in how to best use their money to bring about social change.

"Well, [the arrest] got me lots of newspaper articles, for better or worse," Pearson says. And for stiffening morale in the anti-war movement, he says, "it was fairly useful."

Would he do it again? Nope. "I have a wider range of options now," Pearson says.

Lanya Shapiro, a fellow activist, says Pearson is better used in other ways these days. "You have to have an inside strategy and an outside strategy," she says. Pearson's value to social causes no longer lies in creating a high-visibility ruckus, she says, but in organizing and working from within.

Indeed, first among Pearson's "range of options" is Resource Generation, a New York-based organization that offers programs on philanthropy and social justice for "young people with wealth," as the group's Web site describes them. Two years ago, Pearson joined the organization's board of advisers. Six months ago, he was tapped to head Resource Generation's fundraising committee.

Pearson, 30, can thank Granny for making him one of those wealthy youngsters he now advises.

For all his political activism, there's an interesting facet of Pearson's life: He's not a U.S. citizen. At least, not yet.

He was born in Australia, the eldest son of a British chemistry professor and the Australian woman who had a room to rent when the Brit first arrived in Canberra. (Rather than becoming landlord and tenant, the two became husband and wife.) In 1983, when Pearson was 5, the family emigrated to America and settled in Cleveland, where Tony Pearson joined the faculty at Case Western Reserve University.

Pearson's early life was typically American. He was a member of his high school marching band, played soccer and tennis and was on track to become an Eagle Scout when, as he puts it, "I turned 18 too quickly" -- the age when the Boy Scouts decide you're not a boy any more. Pearson came to Chapel Hill in 1994 to attend UNC, graduating with a history degree in 1997 on an accelerated schedule.

Wider understanding

As often happens in a university setting, Pearson's latent activism was switched on while he was in college. He had been interested in environmental matters since his Scouting days, but it blossomed in a new direction when he met minority students from poor neighborhoods. Pearson recalls that while he was thinking about ways to promote recycling, his new friends were talking about kids in their neighborhoods dying of lead poisoning.

"My understanding of the environment slowly started to expand," Pearson says.

As did his social consciousness in general. In short order Pearson was involved in a campus movement to improve the working conditions and pay of UNC housekeepers. After graduating, he became a manager at the Internationalist, the Chapel Hill bookstore that is to left-wing movements what an abbey is to a traveling friar -- a place of comfort and nourishment.

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