Lila Ashenbrenner received her liberal arts degree from Linfield in 1974, a year of economic double-dros. She saw her lack of specialization as a strength, not a weakness. “So many people were graduating and not getting jobs back then. I thought it would be better to be well rounded. And it couldn’t have worked out better.”

She graduated with no career goals, but with an open mind: After working in a veterinary clinic for several years, she got to know a County Sheriff’s deputy, who invited her on a ride-along. One thing led to another, and eventually she was working with animals again—on the Hillsboro Police Department’s K-9 unit. She was only the second woman hired by the department and at that time the only female K-9 officer in Oregon.

“Talk about a branch not falling far from the tree,” she said, laughing at her entrenchment in this corner of Oregon. “Our mayor right now was our high school student teacher” at Aloha High School.

She may not have ventured far from home, but Ashenbrenner has worked in some exciting areas of law enforcement—narcotics and undercover operations, as well as public information and administration. She has risen steadily through the ranks in nearly 28 years with the department, from patrol to detective, sergeant, lieutenant, captain and commander, culminating in her promotion to Hillsboro’s deputy chief in 2003. Now that she’s spending more time at a desk, she said, she misses the immediacy of being on the streets. “You never knew what you were going to be doing next,” she said. “And I really enjoyed narcotics. It always felt good to put the bad guys in jail.”

But the work is not always as glamorous and high-tech as it is portrayed on television. “I wish we really had that equipment available,” Ashenbrenner said. Her biggest challenges these days is hiring personnel. She said, adding, “We’re looking for people who want this as a career, not a job.”

— Beth Rogers Thompson

When Rick Turner ’63 entered Linfield, he was one of only seven African-American students. He knew he had entered a world far different from his urban home-town, Hartford, Conn. He knew acquaintances back home were saying he’d soon return in defeat. He was determined to prove them wrong.

Turner came on a basketball scholarship, thanks to his high school coach’s friendship with Paul Durham ’36, then Linfield athletic director. Curtis Manns ’62, who had graduated from Weaver High a year ahead of Turner, had come to play football. Turner calls Linfield “a saving grace.” He had to overcome academic deficiencies and loneliness. He was 17 years old and 3,000 miles from familiar faces.

“In retrospect, I’m really thankful for the opportunity to go to Linfield,” says Turner. “I know it made me a better person. These were the most important four years of my life because I learned how to endure. It made me a stronger person.”

Turner may not have found many African Americans at Linfield, but he did find a caring, supportive environment. “The people at Linfield were helpful, they were nurturing, they respected me, and I respected them. I don’t think I could have survived if the environment wasn’t warm and conducive for me at that time.”

Turner did return to Connecticut, but not in defeat. After receiving his B.A. in sociology from Linfield, he earned a master’s degree in social work from the University of Connecticut. He returned to the West Coast, completing a Ph.D. in higher education administration/public policy at Stanford.

Many scholars base articles and books on their doctoral dissertations; Turner has built a successful career on his. It is titled “The Academic Achievement and Retention of Black Students at White Institutions.” Since 1988, Turner has served as dean of African-American Affairs at the University of Virginia. Among his celebrated accomplishments, one stands out: the University’s African-American graduation rate has steadily grown from his arrival to a high of 87 percent, among the highest in the nation for public institutions. He also teaches a class, “Sociology of the African-American Community.”

“Turner can empathize with the students he counsels. He knows life can be tough, but he makes it clear that he has high expectations. He would like to see Virginia’s African-American enrollment climb to 14–15 percent; it has held steady at about 9 percent since 2000. But, he says, “When you get a critical mass, which we have at the University of Virginia, it’s much easier—when students can see other students that look like them, and see them succeeding.”

More than 40 years since his Linfield days, Turner stays in touch with his mentor, Durham. Turner attributes his success, both in basketball and his academic career, to Durham’s direction.

“Turner said he considers Turner a mentor and hero.”

Turner shares the lessons learned

“Those were the most important four years of my life because I learned how to endure. It made me a stronger person.”

— Beth Rogers Thompson