As budding professionals in late 1950s, first cousins Dr. Ken Phillips and Bobby Phillips pursued education and careers beyond the hills of their boyhood homes in Bakersville, North Carolina.

Ken earned a D.D.S. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and has been a practicing dentist in Winston-Salem for nearly 50 years. Bobby earned a master’s degree in applied mathematics from North Carolina State University in 1959 and worked as a systems’ analyst for Lockheed Martin in Florida for nearly thirty years.

Though the cousins’ professional lives took them from the beautiful Blue Ridge Mountains of their youth, they have never forgotten their roots. Bobby retired to Bakersville in 1989 and has pursued his woodturning craftsmanship. Ken maintains a home in Bakersville and returns often to hunt, fish, and visit Bobby.

Ken and Bobby grew up on farms in the vicinity of Bakersville in Mitchell County. Ken enjoyed hunting and fishing even as a kid, and Bobby loved riding horses. They attended Bowman High School in Bakersville and played football. Their parents valued education highly. The children of both Phillips families finished college and all went on to professional careers.
“Mostly, we worked on the farm growing up,” Bobby said with a chuckle. “My dad was a high school principal, and Ken’s dad was a mail clerk for the railroad, but they also farmed. Both of our dads worked constantly, and they didn’t believed in leisure time activities. Dad never quite understood why I spent time on woodturning.”

Bobby used his love of mathematics and artistic talent to become a master woodturner. His beautiful and functional art is sold in several of Bakersville’s arts and crafts galleries.

**Phillips Scholarships**

Because Ken and Bobby Phillip have a vested interest in Bakersville and western North Carolina, they have each created a significant scholarship specifically to support ECU dental students who are from Mitchell and surrounding counties. They hope their support will mean more dentists for the area in the future.

Bobby said the idea for the scholarships originated with Ken. “As a dentist, Ken knows about people’s health needs around here,” said Bobby. “He thought it would be a good idea for both of us to give some money to help get more dentists over here.”

Ken said, “We know we have some good students in the west who don’t have the money to attend dental school. We thought these scholarships would encourage students to attend and also help us get good dentists in rural western areas where they are needed.”

The timing of the scholarships coincides with the construction of the ECU School of Dental Medicine Community Service Learning Center in Mitchell County. The center, scheduled to open this fall in Spruce Pine, will allow faculty members, residents and students to provide care for adults and children in an educational setting and at reduced cost.

Spruce Pine is just one of the eight sites across the state where ECU dental education centers will serve the oral health needs of rural and underserved communities. Centers in Ahoskie, Elizabeth City, Lillington, and Sylva are already serving patients. Centers in Davidson County and Lumberton will also open this fall. A Brunswick County site will be ready for patients in 2015.

Ken and Bobby Phillips follow the progress of the Community Service Learning Center in Spruce Pine enthusiastically. “I’ve kept my eye on the construction of the new facility, and it is looking really good,” said Ken. The new center is located near the Blue Ridge Regional Hospital, which provided the land and serves as ECU’s partnering institution in the region.

An important part of the service learning experience for fourth-year students and residents is that they will get to live in Spruce Pine for several weeks to fulfill their clinical rotations—enough time to fall in love with the people and the mountains.

As young men, the Phillips cousins had to leave their mountain community to fulfill their career aspirations. But with support from people like Ken and Bobby and with ECU’s new chapter in oral health for North Carolina, perhaps more young dentists from the beautiful Blue Ridge will return home to make a difference.