

OCT 2 1992

SPECIAL REPORT

The Ring-tum Phi

WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

LEXINGTON, VIRGINIA

OCTOBER 2, 1992

Comer heads back to jail

By GREGORY PATTERSON
Phi News Editor

Charles Blakely Comer, the former W&L student who served six months in jail for killing a freshman in a 1989 hit-and-run accident, yesterday returned to Rockbridge County jail after violating his probation.

Rockbridge County Circuit Court Judge Rudolph Bumgardner III Thursday revoked Comer's suspended sentence and returned him to jail, ruling that a Georgia DUI conviction was a violation of Comer's probation.

"You got the keys back in your pocket after you killed one person, and you showed the same irresponsible attitude [toward alcohol]," Commonwealth's Attorney Eric Sisler told Comer. "You'd been given an opportunity. Now it's time to pay the penalty."

Comer could spend four and a half years in jail, the unserved portion of his five-year sentence for the March 1989 death of W&L freshman Mary Ashley Scarborough.

Comer, who came to court with his wife of one day and his parents, said Thursday he was prepared to go to jail and wanted to take part in an alcohol treatment program.

In a lengthy account of what he had done since getting out of jail in September 1990, Comer told the court about his Georgia arrest for driving under the influence. He said that he was returning to his home in Winder, Ga., on May 19 after going to a restaurant and a bar with friends in Athens, Ga., about 20 miles from Winder. He said he was pulled over for speeding in Statham, Ga., and registered a .16 blood-alcohol content on a breathalyzer, twice the state's legal limit.

He pleaded no contest to the DUI and speeding charges in September and was given a \$44 fine because he had attended an alcohol-awareness seminar.

Comer acknowledged Thursday that he

had been intoxicated the night he hit Scarborough in 1989 and said he did not drink alcohol for several months after getting out of jail.

He said he started drinking again because he was having problems socializing at the University of Georgia.

Comer said he did not realize he was drunk when he tried to drive home in May and could not recall in court how many drinks he had.

"So after not drinking for [a few months], you had got to drinking again where you couldn't remember how many drinks you had," Sisler asked.

"I was talking with my friends and not counting my drinks," Comer said. "I guess I should have been."

"You were lucky there was not another Miss Scarborough in that little Georgia town when you went zooming through," Sisler said.

Comer was prompted in his account by his lawyer, Thomas Spencer, who told Bumgardner that he was not there "to advocate for leniency, but to help Blake talk about what has happened since he got out of jail."

Comer said he did odd jobs between the time he was released in September 1990 and when he enrolled in the University of Georgia in January 1991. He said that during that time he spoke to three church youth groups about his experience.

"I told them about what I had done and about the nightmares and stuff I had lived with," Comer said. "It made me feel good to do something good for someone else."

After he graduated from the University of Georgia in June 1991, Comer said he had a hard time getting a job when he told prospective employers that he had been in jail.

Comer said he got a job last December

with a Georgia clothing company. In May, he was told he would be promoted to a salesman on June 1, so he and his girlfriend got engaged.

Comer told the court he was celebrating his engagement and promotion with his friends on the night of his May arrest.

Comer said he wanted to break off his engagement before he went back to jail, but his fiancée wanted to prove her devotion to him. They were married Wednesday, one day before Comer's probation hearing.

Comer, who covered up his involvement in Scarborough's death and was arrested on an anonymous tip eight months after the accident, said he immediately told his South Carolina probation officer about his May arrest.

"I was told by people that I didn't have to tell him, that he wouldn't find out," Comer said. "But I wanted to."

Comer's father asked Bumgardner to punish his son in a way that would not entail returning to jail.

"Blake tried very hard to lead what people would call an exemplary life," Braxton Comer said. "His drinking was not dangerous, bad, excessive. It was just this night."

When Bumgardner revoked Comer's suspended sentence, there was a stir in the courtroom as media photographers and camera-

men stood up to get their equipment and wait outside.

"You will remain seated until this court has been adjourned," Bumgardner said sternly.

You were lucky there was not another Miss Scarborough in that little Georgia town when you went zooming through.

**— Eric Sisler,
Commonwealth's Attorney**

There was silence in the room as the sheriff's deputy waited for paper from the court clerk and then led Comer out the side door of the courtroom onto a fire escape. Comer's mother, father and wife watched as the door shut behind him.



Comer