It is just past 5 p.m. and streaks of light from the late-afternoon sun flicker through a canopy of oak and pine branches along the timeless, tea-colored water of the Suwannee River. In the heart of this north Florida wilderness, class is in progress.

A crew of eight exhausted paddlers – all students at USF St. Petersburg – have lifted their canoes onto wooden racks, hauled heavy backpacks and containers of gear and food high onto a wooded hillside, and set up camp for the night. As they prepare dinner in the distance, the man in charge of this unusual course reflects on lessons from another trip way down upon the Suwannee – and the latest journey in outdoor leadership.

“This is a great way to learn about Florida, but it’s an even better way to learn about yourself,” says Terry Tomalin, a double-USF alumnus, with bachelor’s degree in mass communications (1983) and a master’s in Florida Studies (2010). For the past seven years, he has also been an adjunct professor at USFSP in the College of Arts and Sciences, teaching an array of classes he has developed in the realm of Florida culture and history.

But that only comprises a portion of Tomalin’s many pursuits. He has also spent the past quarter-century as an award-winning outdoors writer for the Tampa Bay Times, today the state’s most senior journalist in the field. An old hand at challenging the wilds, he has paddled through the gator-infested Everglades multiple times, kayaked solo from St. Petersburg to Key Largo, completed the grueling “Sharkfest Swim” from Alcatraz to the shore of San Francisco Bay – and helped create the annual Tampa Bay Frogman Swim each January, raising more than a million dollars for the Navy Seal Foundation.

Tomalin’s latest creation is rooted in the calmer confines of the classroom – a popular course that combines two of his central interests: outdoor adventures and leadership skills. Each semester since its inception in 2013, his aptly named “Outdoor Leadership” class has examined leadership traits displayed in historic
expeditions or amid daunting circumstances – such as Lewis and
Clark’s trailblazing path to the Northwest, Sir Ernest Shackleton’s
ill-fated excursion to the South Pole and John F. Kennedy’s heroic
rescue of his PT-109 even after their boat was sunk by a Japanese
destroyer in World War II.

“We study a vast array of different scenarios and decision-
making processes, and pinpoint the common traits that make
great leaders,” Tomalin explains. “The core of our class focuses
on servant-leadership, a concept that places the needs of others
first and encourages personal development. And we always talk
about how the greatest attributes of a leader are selflessness and
resilience.

“A good leader has to put the people they’re leading first at
all times. And good leaders have to be resilient in the face of
unexpected adversity. I tell my students how these traits were
personified by Shackleton on his Antarctic expedition – he failed
to make it across the South Pole but he returned after three years
without losing any of his men. That’s a true leader.”

Tomalin’s class culminates each semester with a three-day canoe
trip – aided by donor support – on the deceptively challenging
Suwannee River, with two nights of camping at pre-arranged sites
along the route. The students spend weeks planning out every
facet of their trip, yet there’s still an element of the unknown – and,
at times, duress and doubt – they must overcome. The first day
stays calm, eased the sting with hydrocortisone cream – and
forged ahead. That evening at the camp site, it was Ebbert who
took charge of the dinner preparations, chopping vegetables and
cooking beef to make two large pots of soup for the campers.

“Remember how worried she was that the group was going to leave
her?” Tomalin says. “But sticking together made her feel invested –
and now she’s running everything. She’s being a leader.”

It’s all about adapting,” Ebbert says with a smile. “You say,
“This is the mission. We’ll figure it out, and rely on each other to
grow up I-75 to pastoral White Springs.

When the group finally reached the Suwannee, Ebbert picked
up gear that had been placed inadvertently in a mound of red
ants, and promptly was bitten all over her shoulders. But she
stayed calm, eased the sting with hydrocortisone cream – and
forged ahead. That evening at the camp site, it was Ebbert who
took charge of the dinner preparations, chopping vegetables and
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To-ward the end of the course, students have to identify a
specific leadership moment in various scenarios and apply that
type of decision-making in their own lives. Tomalin has done plenty
of that. Growing up in Edison, N.J. as the eighth of nine children, he
developed an independent streak about how the greatest attributes of a leader are selflessness and
resilience.

“A good leader has to put the people they’re leading first at
times.”

– Terry Tomalin

Take USF student Holly Ebbert. The Air Force veteran and
mother of two young children needed to muster all of her resilience
the morning of the trip in March. First, her car wouldn’t start at
her home in Tampa, so she called Tomalin in a panic, fearing she
would miss the mandatory 5:45 a.m. departure time at USFSF.
“Holly, we’d never leave without you – we’ll come get you if we
have to,” he assured her – echoing one of his leadership tenets: No
one ever gets left behind. That didn’t prove necessary, as Ebbert’s
husband rushed her and the kids through the pre-dawn darkness to
campus, where she joined her classmates for a three-hour caravan
up I-75 to pastoral White Springs.

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“Remember how worried she was that the group was going to leave
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and now she’s running everything. She’s being a leader.”

“I have two kids, and I tell my wife all the time, ‘God put me
on earth for one reason – to be your husband and be those kids’
father,’” he says. “That’s the only reason I exist. What I want,
and what I need, does not matter. The only reason I’m here is to
protect and feed and nurture my family – my son and my
daughter. That’s what it means to be a man. It’s selflessness. It’s
being a parent.”

And then there’s the Outdoor Leadership class, which he
hopes to expand at USF to include staff, graduate students and
alumni. “I’ve had kids tell me this is the most memorable thing
they’ve done in four years of college,” he says. “I’ve seen people
grow exponentially – starting off introverted, but leaving strong,
confident and ready for anything.”

Learning to lead on the river – learning to lead in life.