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Devotion distinguishes Professor Tomboulian

By **Jeff Samoray**, OU Web Writer

Few faculty members have witnessed as much of Oakland University's development, or have devoted as much of themselves to the institution, as Paul Tomboulian.

He came to represent Oakland's academic excellence in chemistry, being appointed the first chemistry instructor in 1959 and serving as department chair until 1997. Tomboulian not only built the department by leading the hiring of its faculty and developing its academic programs, research activities and laboratories, he also made significant contributions to the creation of the overall university's academic programs and procedures.

As a scholar, Tomboulian is widely known for his pioneering work in environmental studies as well as his interdisciplinary work and teaching in analytical chemistry, biochemistry, toxicology and environmental health. His work has influenced scores of students to go on to environmental careers or incorporate environmental connections in their lives.

In more recent years, Tomboulian's devotion to the university manifested itself in a different fashion. He and his wife, Alice, took action to record the quickly vanishing stories from those who played significant roles in Oakland's early development. The resulting oral histories, called the OU Chronicles Project, remain important permanent sources for future researchers and anyone interested in the early days of OU.

This past April, in recognition of his many years contributions to the university, OU elevated Tomboulian to the status of Distinguished Professor of Chemistry. He joins just 10 other faculty members who have been honored with this prestigious award.

Future achievements may only have been dreams when D.B. "Woody" Varner, chancellor of what was then called Michigan State University - Oakland (MSUO), brought Tomboulian and his wife to visit the brand new institution in May 1959.

Tomboulian was completing post-doctorate work at the University of Minnesota when Varner asked him about teaching freshmen chemistry at MSUO. At the time, the campus was little more than farmland from Matilda Wilson's Meadow Brook Farms estate. The only partially completed buildings were North and South Foundation halls. The faculty/staff subdivision was just a pasture.

"As late as March 1959, there were no students enrolled and no faculty hired," Tomboulian said. "The clock was running and Varner was hustling to get ready for a fall opening and was out selling the university. He did most of the faculty recruiting.

"Woody was very much a salesman, and I was sold by his story of what Oakland was going to be. But he was also particular in his recruiting. He invited not just the candidate but also the spouse to visit the campus. He was looking for those who would make an investment in the institution – to set up shop and stay."

After 45 years, Tomboulian and his wife remain as devoted to Oakland as they were in 1959 when it was little more than a construction site and a vision of what MSUO would become.

"One of the things that intrigued me about coming to Oakland was the idea of being a pioneer," Tomboulian said. "The first students also had the pioneer spirit – they knew they would be the first. The whole environment, activity and operation were very pleasing to me.

"I stayed because I developed roots here. I felt that I needed to make connections with the university and the community. You can't do that if you're a temporary employee."

When MSUO's doors first opened, Tomboulian was, in fact, the "Chemistry Department." As a 24-year-old assistant professor of chemistry, he was in charge of teaching freshmen chemistry and also responsible for setting up the first chemistry labs (then located in North Foundation Hall). He took on a larger institutional role by helping develop MSUO's admissions criteria, compiling MSUO's first catalogue (in 1960) and designing all the chemistry laboratories and classrooms for Hannah Hall, which opened in 1962.

"There wasn't any attitude of getting somebody else to do a task," Tomboulian said. "You did what needed to be done."

Tomboulian wasn't done once the **Chemistry Department** was established. He received the first research grant on campus and initiated the first undergraduate research program in 1960, introduced biochemistry to the university and the first science-based environmental health major in Michigan in 1966, obtained the first external department accreditation on campus in 1967, designed the environmental health program in 1974, initiated the Ph.D. program in health and environmental chemistry in the early 80s, initiated one of the first undergraduate occupational health majors in the country in 1978, and designed the chemistry laboratories for the Science and Engineering Building, which opened in 1997.

"Paul truly is a founding member of the university," said Professor of Chemistry and Department Chair Michael Sevilla. "When he came to Oakland, he began doing organic chemistry research, but by the late 1960s developed one of the first environmental studies programs in the nation. He expanded his interests in local area environmental projects and helped establish environmental regulations. His environmental studies class is one of the most popular general education courses that OU offers. He's a popular instructor and has been an adviser for Ph.D. students for some time. He's willing to spend time with them one-on-one in a way that students appreciate."

"The department is well-known as one of the university's strengths, and its development is mostly Paul's doing. The faculty members he selected were those he respected, and he's given us a lot of guidance over the years. I think he's felt that the department was his own garden. He tilled it with love, and loved the flowers that have grown."

One of Tomboulian's proudest achievements is the establishment of the environmental health program, which he continues to direct. The program was a pioneering effort that emerged at the dawn of public awareness about the hazards of toxic substances in air and water.

"In the late 1960s, people were taking a more active role in the world, and some of the rethinking that was a part of the 60s involved changing what was going on," Tomboulian said. "Until that time, 'progress' was the excuse for inappropriate behavior on pollution. There was no organized science-based discipline associated with environmental studies."

"It became clear that traditional chemistry was losing its relevancy for me, so I shifted my focus away from synthetic organic chemistry. Scientists have much to offer in the field of environmental sciences and the quality of our air and water."

A case illustrating this point occurred in the late 1970's when some of Tomboulian's students conducted research on the water quality of the Paint Creek, which runs through northeast Oakland County. When pollutants were found in the water, Tomboulian and his students determined that the source was the stormwater system in the Village of Lake Orion. Their findings led to the enforcement of regulations that helped improve the quality of the creek.

One of Tomboulian's students who contributed to the Paint Creek research, Joe Gardella, now is a professor of chemistry at State University of New York at Buffalo. He's just one of many students whose career paths Tomboulian influenced.

"I can honestly say that no other person, outside of my family, has had such a positive impact on me as has Paul Tomboulian," said Jerry Compton, adjunct assistant professor of chemistry and laboratory manager, who in 1966 became one of Oakland's first four master's degree graduates and one of its first two chemistry M.S. graduates.

"I came to MSUO to become an engineer like my older brother, who had graduated from the General Motors Institute," Compton said. "But it quickly became clear that engineering was not the program for me. But I really enjoyed Paul's chemistry classes so I went in that direction and wound up loving it. After graduating with my master's, I got stuck teaching high school and junior high chemistry and math, which wasn't the most inspiring thing to me. I became reacquainted with Paul in 1969 and he asked me to be the department's laboratory manager. I took the job and then began teaching at Oakland in the mid-1970's. For 28 years, I worked for Paul until he stepped down as chair. And, for those 28 years, I observed a person whose main objective was to make the department a quality department in teaching and research."

Though he is presently on phased retirement and will have no appointment after the 2003-04 academic year, Tomboulian hopes to continue to have a role in the department.

"I may do some teaching if asked," he said. "I'd prefer to assist my colleagues with whatever services I can provide. My spouse and I expect to remain active in the community – no rocking chairs for us."

SUMMARY

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