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Beloved professor delivers 'last lecture'

By *Jeff Samoray, OU Web Writer*

Whether he was teaching Shakespeare, music and art, film studies, 19th century literature or serving as director of **The Honors College**, Professor of English Brian Murphy was a source of inspiration for countless students in his 35 years at Oakland University. He also made many friends along the way.

As evidence of the genuine affection between Murphy and the OU community, more than 200 students, faculty, staff and administrators gathered April 19 in the Oakland Center Banquet Rooms to attend his "last lecture" and honor him for his contributions.

Murphy, who joined the OU faculty in 1969, will retire to a "gentlemanly life of thoughtful ease" in August. He earned his B.A. from the University of Detroit and his Ph.D. in English from the University of London. His publications include a critical study of C.S. Lewis and a novel, "The Enigma Variations." In addition to his teaching duties, Murphy has served on many university committees, presented countless programs and was director of The Honors College from 1985-2002. A true renaissance man, Murphy also has studied music and conducting, and has performed in several **Music, Theatre and Dance** productions in Varner Studio Theatre.

In his lecture, titled "Murphy and I," he focused on key life experiences that shaped his character and philosophy of life.

"One of my peak experiences at Oakland was delivering a commencement address several years ago," he said. "I worked very hard on my speech and rehearsed it as an actor would his lines. I thought a long time about what advice I would give the graduates, but what it came down to was simple – have fun. As you go through life, be sure you're having some fun. That's when you know you're living your life well. The trick, of course, is to find it and know when you've got it."

Throughout his lecture, Murphy shared taped audio experiences that had inspired him throughout his life, beginning with a recording of the "William Tell Overture," which he first heard while listening to radio broadcasts of "The Lone Ranger" at age 7.

"Music opened up the whole world for me," Murphy said. "It became an extremely important part of my life, even though I'm not a musician. At that moment, I tried to figure out how to get music into my life."

Music and an interest in politics became early driving forces for Murphy. He learned to play the drums and played in the University of Detroit marching band and wedding bands on weekends. He found the speeches by then-President John F. Kennedy stirring, and he became a campaign manager for his father's run for state Senate.

"He lost the election, and I was a total failure as a campaign manager," Murphy said. "I learned then that being that closely involved with politics was not for me. You have to pay attention to your own reactions and feelings. You have to know who you are."

"Then the other Murphy started to appear. I felt good about being at the university. I majored in English and really started to love literature. It became my driving passion."

While pursuing his doctorate in London, he incorporated his love of literature and politics by writing his dissertation on the political novels of Disraeli and Trollope. Another major influence was the works of novelist and playwright George Bernard Shaw. When a position opened in the English Department at Oakland, Murphy knew it was perfect for him.

"It was a wonderful experience, and I became very engaged," he said. "When I came to Oakland, I had already met many people in the English Department. Then I went to a department party at (Professor of English) Gertrude White's

home. There was absolutely brilliant conversation and everybody seemed to have read everything. I absolutely loved it and wanted to get in on that.”

It's clear that Murphy enjoyed the job as much as his colleagues. He recounted an evening when he was preparing a lecture on the poetry of Robert Browning and realized it was a key career moment.

“I was working on the lecture and just got very high on life,” Murphy said. “I realized that I got to read the greatest works of literature, then get paid to go to a classroom and talk with my students about them. I always felt it is a real honor to stand in a classroom – it's a kind of sacred space. I decided that evening that this was the main thing that I wanted to do.”

Murphy further emphasized the amount of pleasure he derived from his profession by playing a romping, playful rendition of the Rolling Stones' song “Satisfaction,” recorded at home many years ago with himself on drums and Distinguished Professor of English Bob Eberwein on piano.

“Long before I had my commencement speech written, I was already acquiring the idea of having fun,” Murphy said. “Bob and I had a blast. We team-taught a film course that we developed from the ground up. We had to figure out everything, including how to get films in those pre-videotape days. Film studies became a very important part of our lives.”

Murphy closed by offering a final assessment of the richness contained within the university environment.

“Inside the heart of the university there is a whole series of secret societies,” Murphy said. “Music, art, literature and science are all secret societies. At the heart of it all is a secret we're all in on and can all share.”

Elementary education major and Honors College student Katie Couture was one of many students who attended Murphy's lecture and the reception held afterwards in his honor.

“His comments about what he's learned from life and about the importance of having fun really touched me,” Couture said. “I think he's leaving a strong legacy at Oakland. And there's also a strong sense of leadership about him. We're going to miss him.”

Current Honors College Director and Professor of English Jude Nixon also spoke of Murphy's qualities as a leader.

“Brian Murphy's legacy is simple,” said Nixon. “His tenure as Honors College director is the longest among those who have been in that position, and he really helped shape it into what it is today – a very visionary program. It has been his baby, and I've inherited a legacy that he put into place.

“Brian also is perhaps Oakland's most well-known faculty member. Every time I'm out in the community and people learn that I'm a faculty member at Oakland, they always mention Brian Murphy. A large part of this comes from book clubs and various activities and discussions he leads. Many people see him as the face of Oakland. Everyone speaks of how erudite he is, and how a conversation with him is a treat. He has been a real ambassador for the university.”

The “last lecture” series is a tradition at Oakland that gives a retiring faculty member an opportunity to reflect on his or her career, the history of the university and what they see as the future for the university. The program also provides an opportunity to thank a departing faculty member for his or her contributions to the university.

SUMMARY

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