



Thursday, April 17, 2003

Retiring professor gives one last lecture

In what's become a newly revived tradition, retiring Professor of Chemistry Geoff Brieger gave "The Last Lecture" to a crowd of students and colleagues on April 15 in the Oakland Center Fireside Lounge. After 40 years at Oakland University, Brieger had plenty of good material with which to regale his audience, telling tales of the early days on campus when sheep roamed nearby pastures and educators were busy building a university from the ground up.

"He's contributed to this institution as profoundly as any other professor," said Michael Savilla, Chemistry Department chair, who introduced Brieger for the last lecture. The event gives retiring faculty members an opportunity to share experiences, thoughts and encouragement to students, colleagues and friends.

A specialist in organic chemistry, Brieger first came to Oakland University in 1963 as an assistant professor. He came to Michigan after earning degrees from three large universities – Harvard, Berkeley and the University of Wisconsin, where he earned his doctorate. By graduation, he had job offers from several similar institutions, but life at a big school was not what he wanted. He dreamed instead of teaching at a small university where he could make a difference.

"That's when I heard of a small, upstart school in Michigan," he said.

Weeks later, he unpacked his bags and found himself on a tree-filled campus with only four buildings: North and South Foundation halls, Hannah Hall and Kresge Library.

"When I started, there were only three other chemistry professors," he said. The entire faculty numbered only 60. "At Berkeley, there were 60 people in the chemistry department alone," he recalled.

The young staff enjoyed a feeling of adventure. "The early Oakland faculty members were different," Brieger said. "They were pioneers, interested in how a university should be run. Of course, there were 60 different opinions, but it was an exciting time with exciting conversation."

Brieger believes much of that experimental spirit stemmed from OU's first chancellor Woody Varner. He had "real charisma," Brieger said. "He was a courtly gentleman who listened to faculty and to students." Varner encouraged Brieger to explore ideas for new programs at OU, including a conference in the 1960s on social responsibility and an extension center that provided educational opportunities for young people in Pontiac.

That sense of responsibility stayed with Brieger throughout his career. During his tenure, he served on numerous committees including the OU Senate and Environmental Development Committee, helping shape the campus and buildings such as the Recreation Center.

"If you want to change a university, you have to work within the system," he told students, prevailing upon them to participate in school government and representative offices. He encouraged them to draw inspiration from the students who came before them, especially those in the 1960s and early 1970s.

"Most of you are oriented toward your goals and work and there's not much left for anything else, especially for wonderment," Brieger said. "In the late 1960s, students awoke and started questioning things. It was an exciting time."

Wrapping up his last lecture, Brieger thanked his friends and colleagues for making his tenure at Oakland a smooth one. With quiet understatement, he told his audience, "Teaching, for me, has been very, very pleasant."

SUMMARY

In what's become a newly revived tradition at Oakland University, retiring Professor of Chemistry Geoff Brieger gave "The Last Lecture" to a crowd of students and colleagues. After 40 years at Oakland University, Brieger had plenty tales of the early days on campus when sheep roamed nearby pastures and educators were busy building a university from the ground up.

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