



AN ACADEMIC JOURNEY

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Education has always been a founding principle in shaping the destinies of societies and nations. As Oakland University celebrates the golden jubilee of its founding, I recall with pride and introspection the two nations and societies that I have had the privilege of experiencing: the United States of America and the new nation of modern India, which came into its own after 1400 years of segmented self-rule or foreign occupation.

Leaders of the American independence movement, like those involved in the similar struggle for Indian freedom, were prosperous landlords and men and women of means. They all developed a sense of sacrifice for a higher good; they lived simply and worked hard. As a follower of great national leaders, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, my father instilled these same values in all of his children. “Work like a horse and live like a saint if you wish to accomplish something of substance in your lifetime,” he used to say. Similar qualities were also the hallmark of those leaders committed to a vision of enriching society in 1957, when Matilda and Alfred Wilson invested their fortune in establishing what has now become a nationally noted university.

From its early years, OU was a leader in higher education through its foreign language programs, study-abroad experiences and overall challenging curriculum. Our vast number of graduates and their personal and professional successes attest

to the quality of experiences they had during their formative years at OU. Our alums shine whether through leadership in courts of law, election to legislative offices, professorships at ranked universities, swift movement up the corporate ladder; or as educators, health care givers, engineers and prominent transformers in our society. It is a rare phenomenon that I frequent a large local store, a hospital, a law office, a corporation or a municipal park, and do not encounter a current student or an OU alum. We should all be proud to tout who we are and champion our educational roots.

As I reflect on my own life's journey, it is one influenced by recurring themes of hard work and commitment. Growing up in India, with thousands of students taking centralized examinations at the high school level and above, the competition for admission to ranked colleges and universities was nerve-racking. One had to work hard and excel to survive or face failure and social shame.

As an undergraduate, one of my instructors encouraged me to consider biology, and if possible, medicine, as a career since I exhibited early signs of a steady hand while performing microscopic dissections in the laboratory. Both options thrilled me, and after a successful, but circumstantially interrupted, admission into medical school, I chose to follow my love for biology. It was in 1962 that I first heard the word, "DNA," from a research-oriented instructor with a background in genetics. The discovery of the double helix and other scientific developments excited and inspired us to engage in research, but interest in a specific field still eluded me.

Circumstances and fate took me along 500 miles from Punjab to Banaras Hindu University (BHU), located in eastern India in the holy city of Varanasi, where the enlightened Buddha gave his first sermon around 500 BC. Nearly all biology instructors at BHU were well-traveled, had studied abroad or were graduates of Cambridge (U.K.) or U.S. universities. The level of education was top notch and demanding. During the dissertation work, we cleaned our own laboratory glassware, fed the animals and cleaned their trays, and hand-wrote entire

articles from a single copy of the *Scientific American* placed on reserve in the main library. These experiences of making the most with what we had became useful upon arrival in America.

In 1973, just months after my dissertation defense, I took a post-doctoral appointment at the Mayo Clinic. My progress there was inspired by the work of my mentor, Dr. David Toft, on the initial characterization of the estrogen receptor, and by the legacy of the 1950 Nobel laureates, Drs. P. S. Hench and E.C. Kendall, for their discovery of cortisone and its application in treating rheumatoid arthritis. Mayo, called the “Mecca of Medicine,” provided a unique platform for inquiry, where researchers and clinicians held joint meetings and seminars on recent advances in medicine and patient care. These cross-disciplinary approaches are now being introduced and practiced at various levels at OU in both didactic and research programs.

The 1970s represented an interesting time. Oakland was small as were the number of its faculty and students. When I came for a job interview, Walton Boulevard was under construction, lined with tar drums. I stayed at the “Spartan Motel,” in Rochester, for Meadow Brook Hall was booked solid. I *still* took the job. Arriving in Rochester with a U-haul hitched to my first car, a ‘69 Grand Prix, I stopped at Knapp’s Donut Shop on Main Street in Rochester for directions to the apartment we had rented via mail. The donut shop was full of lively and humane people, and we chatted a bit. I have been returning to the shop for a cup of coffee for 31 years.

I found the early environment in the department of Biological Sciences inspiring. Laboratories were open seven days a week and often all-night experiments were in progress. A majority of the faculty held research grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) or the National Science Foundation, and the hallways were full of enthusiastic undergraduates and masters degree students who passionately loved science, and were equally competitive at softball games with faculty. I miss those times and experiences.

Back then, the atmosphere on campus was calm and serene. My temporary faculty office was located next to a one-

room AAUP office in Dodge Hall. Relatively new to the country and the university, I was advised by my neighbor and friend, Eileen Bentel, that I had no choice but to become a member of the AAUP. And so I was for 25 years until new responsibilities interrupted this professional association.

Biochemistry and endocrinology research required expensive materials and chemicals, and writing and securing an external grant was compulsory. The funding of my first NIH grant helped maintain passion for research that still resonates today. In the 70s, we kept our research animals (chicks from a nearby farm) in the attic of the Clinical Lab building across Pioneer Drive. Years later we switched to a cell culture model and eliminated the use of animals in research. Over the years, nearly 80 undergraduates, graduates and post-doctoral students received training in the laboratory; many are now active physicians, professors and instructors, laboratory scientists and managers working in the pharmaceutical industry or in hospitals.

It has been a treat to travel all over the U. S. and find a former research student in nearly every big city. I have many fond memories. I remember the excitement of undergraduates in presenting their work in Amsterdam, Prague and Toronto; and their frustration at being misunderstood as doctoral students. It was fun working with more than two dozen graduate students for hours and days at a stretch to help them complete their theses and dissertations. Life was also enriched by many fine post-doctoral scientists from France, China, India, Russia, Japan and Yugoslavia who worked in the lab. The hosting of the Meadow Brook conferences on *Steroid Receptors in Health and Disease* brought hundreds of scientists from nearly 30 countries to our campus—many still remember the “ghosts” they encountered at Meadow Brook Hall during their brief stays in the living quarters.

Like aging wine, our campus has grown better and more complex with time. We have been host to social, political and academic leaders of our era. No longer are we confused with Oakland Community College. No longer do our professional

colleagues think we are located in a California valley. We now see OU and Golden Grizzly t-shirts at airports other than Detroit Metro. Oakland is a Cinderella story. We are emerging.

Great achievers are a magnet for greater talents. A distinctive Oakland experience has meant different things to faculty, staff and students. Imagine an Oakland student able to interact with, listen to and share time with men and women who have impacted the political, cultural and academic landscapes of the U. S., and in many cases, the world. The Nobel laureates Roselyn Yalow (1977) and Christian de Duve (1974) discussed at OU the beauty of science and the excitement of their discoveries with faculty and students, while Presidents Jimmy Carter, George W. Bush, Vicente Fox of Mexico, Aleksander Kwasniewski and Lech Walesa of Poland, shook the hands of many inspired future leaders of our society. It was indeed a special OU experience that elevated alum Dennis Pawley, SEHS '82, to executive vice president at Chrysler, and led Michael W. Michalak, CAS '68, to an appointment by President Bush as the U. S. Ambassador to Vietnam. Scores of music fans were ecstatic when the internationally recognized Jazz Violinist Regina Carter, CAS '85, won the 2006 MacCarthur Fellowship for the magic she creates on the strings of her violin.

An Oakland education has also produced leaders in public service and politics that give us bragging rights to claim many, including the current mayors of the cities of Pontiac and Rochester Hills as our own.

Few individuals will ever match the global impact of Dr. V. Everett Kinsey, who earned the 1956 Albert Lasker Award for Clinical Medical Research alongside Jonas E. Salk. He was the key contributor in founding the Eye Research Institute at OU in 1968, and the National Eye Institute, where he provided direction to vision research. Working quietly on the fourth floor of Dodge Hall, Dr. Kinsey mentored and inspired faculty and students alike. A fleet of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows in the Department of Chemistry rejoiced with pride when Dr. T. Malinski was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for his work performed at OU on the

newly discovered bio-signaling molecule, nitric oxide, and its role in cardiac functions. These are some of the countless success stories that must be handed down to every entering student or new faculty member showing that excellence and distinction are woven into the fabric of Oakland University.

The past 31 years at Oakland have been a halcyon experience with many transformative events along the way. During the early years there were opportunities to work with and learn from a number of charter faculty. A few of them, now retired, became caring mentors. Over the years, the OU experience has been enriched by numerous campus activities and events, rejuvenating my dormant interest in poetry, history, international affairs, music, theater, visual and performing arts, and diverse cultures. These opportunities helped balance a busy professional life and enhanced my deep commitment to biomedical research. The company of noted scholars and gifted teachers reinforced my desire to go to the classroom well-prepared and to the laboratory bench well-informed. As I take stock of what we have collectively accomplished here at OU, I am reminded by Robert Frost's immortal lines, "and miles to go before I sleep."

Higher education has been America's greatest gift to the world, along with our leadership in areas of social, political and economic freedom. Despite global political turmoil, America remains the land of opportunity, and its fine universities are the top choice of brilliant minds around the world. But we are reminded by an often used expression, "the best way to crush your laurels is to sit on them." Thus, although OU has made a concerted effort to renew its valued resources and expand its faculty roster, some questions remain. How do we go forward and build on the historic strength of OU? How do we maintain our mission of providing distinctive experiences to our students? Given that the Michigan economy has been cyclic, and that OU's future is tied with Michigan's, the situation calls for exploring creative ways to secure resources, external funding, and build academic and business partnerships and collaborations.

From Fortune 500 corporations to leading biotechnology and health care industries, we are in the midst of an ocean of resources. The regional economic climate requires us to be more creative and proactive in seeking support for our academic, research and community outreach programs.

By combining Jim Collins' "Good to Great" approach with a "Who Moved My Cheese" philosophy, we are positioning ourselves to triumph over challenges. Collins, a student and teacher of enduring great companies, argues that greatness is not a function of circumstances; rather, it is effort and careful planning that can lift one to the next level. While, generally, modern facilities, classrooms, laboratories, and library and technical support are good ingredients of a successful academic enterprise, excellence is not limited to these benchmarks.

For example, should one visit the nation's top established institutions, including the NIH, it may be a surprise to learn that equipment is shared, limited laboratory space is used by more than one investigator, and there are "commons" areas and designated work shifts in order to use the available facilities. Many national debates have challenged us to be sensitive to the fact that other nations, with much less than we have materially, are making faster progress in myriad ways through innovation and entrepreneurship. There is much to be said about being flexible, adaptable, and lean.

Greatness and achievement are not *solely* tied to physical plants and facilities, but to creativity, motivation and intellectual acumen. We have a beautiful campus, but our strength is our people—the talented and dedicated faculty and staff, inspired students and generous friends and alumni. The responsibility to succeed is intrinsic and not external. We derive strength from each other, find motivation from the company we keep, and achieve much despite challenging circumstances.

I recall in 1976 that without a starting package or a promise of laboratory space, a young faculty at OU started bench research in a teaching lab, worked after class hours, and used the university machine shop to create equipment that was expen-

sive and beyond reach. These efforts led to a successful externally funded research program that was sustained for years. The resolve in us overcomes challenges, and taking advantage of all the good things with which we are bestowed will help us meet our personal and institutional goals.

Besides economic hurdles, the academy is also experiencing attack by some who believe we lead a privileged life with job security while the rest of the world struggles to make a living on a day-to-day basis. Accountability of our profession is being challenged.

Most recently, we are confronted with another issue; universities are accused of producing more graduates in areas of less demand and fewer in needed disciplines. Some believe that U. S. graduates lack appropriate skills in Thomas Friedman's "flat world." OU's record, however, has been exemplary by any account. Although we are not a trade school, and involved in the business of creating and sharing knowledge, our graduates are becoming preferred hires in increasingly greater numbers. Nearly 87 percent of our alumni work and live in the region and fuel the economy by their professional and civic engagements.

Thus, time is ripe for all segments of the OU community to come together and proudly declare what we represent and do for the region. Let us engage the media and write more editorials and opinion pieces to reflect our contributions to the region and to society. Let us contact our elected representatives and make them allies in the struggle for seeking equity in appropriations among the 15 state institutions.

We in the academy are custodians of the public trust and are vulnerable to the targets of ill-informed or envious competitors. Just as skeptics were defied 50 years ago when Matilda and Alfred Wilson committed to founding a unique institution of higher learning, let us commit to work together to fulfill the utopian dream of the founders of this great institution and renew a pledge of excellence for the next 50 years.