McMicken College of Arts & Sciences

UNIVERSITY OF Cincinnati

Colleague Pens Tribute to Frank Meeks, Chemistry

Chemistry professor passes away.

Date: 1/17/2007
By: Britt Kennerly
Phone: (513) 556-8577
Four years after retirement and almost 50 years after arriving at UC, Frank R. Meeks, retired professor of physical chemistry, died Dec. 6, 2006. The following is a condensed version of William B. Jensen's tribute to his longtime colleague, written for the department's newsletter.

Frank Robert Meeks was born on Dec. 5, 1928, in Fort Worth, Texas, the second of three siblings, and grew up on his parents' ranch.

Though his father's ancestors had moved to Texas from New England in the 19th century, his mother was a first-generation Russian immigrant. As a consequence, Frank was proficient in both English and Russian and, during his early years as a faculty member, occasionally did translation work for Chemical Abstracts, as well as administering the proficiency test for graduate students electing to use Russian to fulfill their foreign language requirements for the PhD degree.

Frank received his elementary and secondary education in the public schools of Texas (where, he always claimed, his teachers consisted mostly of geographically displaced New England schoolmarms). In 1949 he received a BS degree in chemistry and mathematics from Texas Christian University. He began graduate school at Vanderbilt University the next year, but transferred to the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in 1951, where he completed a PhD in physical chemistry under the supervision of Rudy Marcus (Nobel Prize 1992) in 1956.

Following a postdoctoral appointment with Oscar Rice at the University of North Carolina, Frank joined the faculty of the Department of Chemistry at the University of Cincinnati in 1957, where he gradually worked his way through the ranks, becoming an associate professor in 1969 and full professor in 1977.

Frank R. Meeks joined the faculty of the Department of Chemistry in 1957. Meeks died Dec. 6, 2006.

He retired in the summer of 2002 after nearly 45 years of service. During that time he published more than 30 papers dealing largely with the thermodynamics of diffusion and, in more recent years, the sustained mechanics of plasmas, and also supervised the doctoral and master's theses of more than 35 graduate students.

For most of his 45 years at the University of Cincinnati, Frank taught the course in chemical thermodynamics, a subject which is seldom a favorite among students because of its overly formal mathematical structure. Yet, in spite of this, Frank was quite successful as a teacher. Thus the 1972 issue of Insight (a product of the student activism of the 1960s whose purpose was to evaluate courses and professors), though complaining, as expected, of the course's heavy emphasis on math, nevertheless noted that "Dr. Meeks is an excellent professor who knows his subject thoroughly" and whose "unique approach aided in the

learning of an extremely difficult subject."

More personal was an anonymous note from an undergraduate chemistry major which was slipped under the door to Frank's office:

"I thought before the year started that thermo was going to be a really dry course. I now find it my most interesting of all. I've had little background in thermo in other courses, and I disliked them very much. You manage to keep me so involved that I can't believe it is for real. It makes me feel better that I am going through college and at least enjoying some of the courses in my major. So I thank you for the effort which you put into the course and into teaching. Signed: A no-longer desperate chemistry major."

Such responses were not unexpected, given Frank's personal philosophy of teaching: "Teaching, in my opinion, is not limited to the classroom; much of it occurs in the office or in the hallway or in a few cases, I can recall, over the telephone. Nor has it been limited to interaction with students, as I have a steady – and welcome – procession of faculty of this department and others past my desk in search of guidance in physicochemical problems.

"We all consider ourselves excellent, interesting and interested teachers of our subject, else we would go immediately to another way of involving ourselves in chemistry ... It is regrettable than on-paper documentation of teaching effectiveness is in principle unobtainable, since the teaching process itself is an instant-to-instant interaction between teacher and student. One can only rely on hearsay, point to experience, and observe the achievements of students at a time far later than when the actual 'teaching' was done."

In keeping with this long-range point of view, many of Frank's better students kept in touch with him for years after taking his course and would often visit or write him in order to update him on the progress of their own careers.

During his years as a graduate student at Brooklyn Polytechnic, Frank lived in a neighborhood favored by many Mideastern immigrants. As a result he became a lifelong devotee of many aspects of Mideastern culture, and especially the aesthetics of belly dancing and the beauty of Oriental rugs. In later life he not only collected Oriental rugs, he also learned to weave and repair them and sometimes lectured on the subject to various local organizations.

In 1963 Frank spent a year in Montpellier as a Fulbright Research Fellow, where he added an appreciation of French art and antiques to his list of interests, as well as a proficiency in the French language (indeed, the late John Alexander used to say that Frank was the only person he knew who could pun in three languages).

By 1981 Frank was able to build a modern, architecturally unique, multilevel home in Hyde Park which he filled with French antiques, paintings, and his beloved Oriental rugs. Known for his impeccable manners and dress and his wry sense of humor, he also cultivated a taste for high-end automobiles, being particularly fond of Cadillacs and Jaguars.

When Frank retired in the summer of 2002, he simply walked out of his office, leaving it to others to dispose of the contents. Nor did he ever return to the department or make use of the retirement office that he was given on the fourth floor. However, he did make an effort to attend the weekly lunches that Frank Kaplan had organized for many of the emeritus faculty.

Though his many nonchemical interests and large circle of friends and social contacts promised a long and contented retirement, as shortly after his departure became official he suffered a heart attack and was hospitalized. This was the beginning of a cycle of hospitalizations and rehabilitations driven by a seemingly endless series of ever more serious medical problems, which came to an end only with his death four years later on Dec. 6, 2006.

I know from personal conversations with Frank that, in matters of religion, he was a nonbeliever, though he never attempted to force his views on others or to openly criticize their religious beliefs. Despite the horrific medical problems he encountered during his brief retirement, he maintained his disbelief to the end, which probably accounts for the fact that, in keeping with his final wishes, there was no formal public funeral or memorial after his death.

As a consequence, it would be inappropriate to sanctify his life and death with conventional religious platitudes. Though I never questioned Frank about his tastes in literature, I think, given his love of Persian rugs, that he would not object if instead we chose to use an appropriate quatrain from the 12th-century Persian poet, Omar Khayyam, which beautifully summarizes the agnostic view of life and death:

"Into this world, the why not knowing
Nor whence, like water willy-nilly flowing.
And out again, like wind along the waste,
I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing."

Though uncertain whether Frank's view of life and death was quite so bleak, I am confident that, as a chemist who devoted his professional life to the study of statistical mechanics and the way in which order and direction evolve out of the willy-nilly motions of atoms and molecules, he would have thoroughly appreciated the underlying metaphor.

More A&S News | A&S Home | A&S Research | UC News | UC Home