A Simple Life and a Desire to ‘Give Something Big’

Maureen E Schlangen, University of Dayton

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/maureen_schlangen/21/
A simple life, and desire to ‘give something big’

A beloved chemistry professor who taught almost every doctor, dentist and scientist in UD’s alumni ranks from the 1950s through the 1980s is making a difference today to hundreds more.

In 2001, a year after chemistry professor Carl I. Michaelis died, the University received a remarkable bequest of $1.7 million — part of the estate he’d built with a modest salary, a life lived simply and an investment portfolio that he added to but never subtracted from.

Ten years ago, 16 students received the first awards from Michaelis’ endowed fund. Since then, it’s yielded 251 scholarships totaling more than $622,000.

“He was a very frugal man,” said longtime colleague Al Fratini, professor emeritus of chemistry. “He knew he wanted to give something big to UD, and he lived in a way that would make him able to do that.” Michaelis was an avid reader of the Wall Street Journal, Fratini said, and when he read of advances in chemistry that looked promising, he invested.

“Students liked him,” said chemistry professor Jerry Keil, who worked with Michaelis for almost 20 years. “He always had students in his office. He would help them with their schedules, but also with their professional goals, what they needed to do to achieve them.”

Michaelis also was a mentor for new faculty members and the faculty adviser to the student chapters of the American Chemical Society and the national premedical honor society Alpha Epsilon Delta.

“He was here all the time,” said Howard Knachel, chemistry professor emeritus. “He was gifted in being able to spot a student’s potential. His attitude toward students was always positive and supportive, but he was tough.”

Michaelis seldom splurged on himself, Keil said.

“On occasion, some of us would go to Frisch’s after Mass at Holy Angels,” Keil said. “Carl liked to get a pancake breakfast, and at that time, you could get a pancake breakfast at Frisch’s for $1.19. At Denny’s on Main Street, the same breakfast was $1.29, but he thought it was a little bit nicer there, so if he had a dime to spare, he would go to Denny’s instead.”

On limited occasion, he took financial advice from others.

“He didn’t have a house until the early 1970s,” Knachel said. “For the longest time, he just rented an upstairs room in a house where someone took boarders, and he was happy. But then Joe Walsh (another professor, now deceased) asked him, ‘Carl, what are you saving all that money for? Someday you’re going to die and never have enjoyed it.’”

But he seemed to enjoy it just fine, said Fratini, Keil and Knachel — carrying around the secret that, someday, all that money was going to do something big.

—Maureen Schlangen

This year, senior premed major Katy Kroger received one of 21 Carl I. Michaelis scholarships. When she broke the good news, her father, Jim Kroger ’77, couldn’t have been more excited or proud of me,” she said. Jim, an electrical engineering graduate, was a student of Michaelis.

“When he found out I had received this scholarship, he took a nice trip down memory lane,” Katy said. “He really enjoyed his class. Little did either of them know they’d have a connection in the future. It sounded like he was not only a fantastic professor, but a wonderful person as well.”

Ground view

By Chad Warren ’05

Pop quiz: If I told you there’s a student packing his bags for a weekend service retreat, a study group camped out in St. Joseph Hall and a heated game of cornhole on the lawn of 515 Irving, could you name the year? I couldn’t — and that’s my favorite thing about UD.

When I returned to my alma mater in April, this time as an employee, I expected (even feared) that campus had changed so drastically it would be unrecognizable to someone gone for nearly a decade. If it wasn’t familiar, would I still feel like a Flyer? One walk up the hill, however, and I was reaffirmed that while carpet may get an upgrade, and Wi-Fi hotspots have cropped up in Roesch Library, the core student experience — knowledge, service, community — remains unchanged.

In alumni relations, I have the privilege of speaking to UD graduates with backgrounds and lives as different as the snowflakes that piled up during my first campus visit in 2001. I share your excitement when the University succeeds; I search for answers when you’re dissatisfied. I talk, I listen, I learn.

And yes, I ask for support. I want to see contributions that make an impact on students’ lives — like the funds that supported Caldwell Street Apartments, which helped make 2012 the first year that UD had enough beds for on-campus undergraduates. I hope to see gifts that reflect your passion, from men’s soccer to the Marian Library. Philanthropy is a Greek word meaning “love of mankind” — something our students, more than 90 percent of whom receive financial aid, feel each time someone offers to help with tuition costs.

Everyone has a UD story — is yours recent, or many years in the making? I hope students 20 years from now won’t be able to tell the difference.

Warren is executive director of University outreach and engagement, and he was smitten with UD from — not despite — his first, mid-snowstorm visit. He can be reached at cwarren1@udayton.edu or 937-229-3588.