

A picture-perfect job

Professor goes above and beyond the call of duty



Forty-one years later with five times the number of students, what started out as a pit stop has turned into a life-long career for biochemist E.C. Nelson.

"I did not ever intend to be a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology," said Nelson. "I wanted to move back home and raise purebred Chester Whites."

Raised on a corn and hog farm in Dunkirk, Ohio, Nelson attended "The" Ohio State University where in 1957 he received his Bachelor of Science in agriculture, focusing primarily on agricultural education.

Nelson then taught for a year at Belle Center High School in Belle Center, Ohio, as an agricultural teacher before realizing he wanted to further his education.

"I found out that I was more interested in how vitamin A worked and its function rather than how much vitamin A was used in a food supplement," Nelson said.

A die-hard Buckeye fan, Nelson returned to Ohio State and earned his Master

Left: E.C. Nelson is proud of his wall of student pictures. Right: E.C. Nelson works with Justin Cordill, biochemistry and molecular biology junior.

of Science and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in animal science.

In 1963, Nelson came to Oklahoma State University's campus after hearing about a job from a colleague and has been here since.

"I've had several job offers, but the kind of work I wanted to do I could do better here, so I stayed," said Nelson. "Also, this college is definitely a leader in the state, region and nation."

Living on campus in student housing, Nelson worked his way up from an instructor to a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology.

Nelson's major research area is the metabolic function of vitamin A and other retinoids. A frequently published author of research papers, Nelson has received numerous awards, grants and funding for his research at Oklahoma State.

"I am 75 percent research and 25 percent teaching, which means I am 100 percent both," said Nelson. "It's a full-time job."

And it is a job he not only enjoys, but also a topic he would like others to enjoy. A shelf filled with books of research and scientific data are hidden behind a wall of Polaroids of current students. As students move to the next classification, he moves the students' pictures up the shelf until they graduate, at which time the pictures are removed.

When Nelson first started at Oklahoma State, there were 15 students in his department. More than 250 students are enrolled in biochemistry and molecular biology this year. Some say it can be attributed to his devotion and enthusiasm for biochemistry and for the students he advises.

"He genuinely loves students," said D.C. Coston, associate director of the Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station. "He helps students along by getting them internships and involving them in research."

Even though Nelson will argue options such as pre-med and pre-vet have been the reason why biochemistry has gained so much interest, students will say it is his informal, hands-on approach

that makes learning more enjoyable and is what keeps students around.

"If I had a question in class, I brought my book in his office and we sat down and worked on it until I figured it out," said Shelbi Guinn, a senior in biochemistry and molecular biology.

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E.C. Nelson

Guinn said Nelson's open-door policy and laid back attitude makes learning easier. He also helps establish class schedules that will best suit the individual student.

"I want them to feel free to discuss their academic problems," said Nelson.

Nelson said it is important to know each student's interest. He said his goal is to get students to where they want to be, even if it is not in biochemistry.

One way Nelson finds out whether or not students are interested is by getting them involved with the Freshman Research Scholars class.

"The fun thing about research is finding new information, new questions and problems, and how the field is expanding every day," Nelson said.

The Freshmen Research Scholars class is designed to give incoming students hands-on experience of what they can be expected to encounter in their major. This gives students the opportunity to get out of a regular lecture and work in a lab, develop research and collect data, which is an important part of their major.

"This class really helps us think about if we really want to be in a lab," said Maggie Talley, biochemistry and molecular biology freshman. "It is an enjoyable and fun class."

Nelson's work is not only noted by students, but also by co-workers. Earl Mitchell, friend, neighbor and head of Oklahoma State Multi-cultural Affairs, worked alongside Nelson as a biochemist.

"It's his personality," said Mitchell. "He nurtures and cares for his students, gives them good advice and goes to bat for them."

Mitchell said biochemistry has always had a great success record for students going to medical school. He also said the program is rigorous and retention is a key issue.

"It is very natural for pre-med students to come into this major," said Mitchell. "Getting them to stay is another part, and that is pretty much what he did."

Nelson said Oklahoma State's open policy with administrators and deans makes his job easier and more enjoyable.

"The administration has always been open," said Nelson. "We could have disagreements but it never got personal; afterward, we could all go have a cup of coffee."

Mitchell said Nelson's strong family ties are what give him the ability to be so effective with students. Nelson and his wife, Joanne, enjoy spending time with their two

daughters, three granddaughters and one grandson.

Nelson retired at the end of the Fall 2003 semester and as his research winds down, he plans on traveling and spending more time with his family. Retirement, however, will not get in the way of his passion; he plans to continue advising and helping students.

Nelson's 41 years of service at Oklahoma State can be summed up with one simple statement: "The student comes first."

Everything he has done has been aimed at helping the student or making the student's life better.

"I want them to find out what they can be successful doing," said Nelson. "They are not going to be successful at their job if they aren't happy." ♦ *By Brian Bendele, Chandler, Okla.*



Top: E.C. Nelson (left) and Shelbi Guinn, biochemistry and molecular biology senior, conduct an experiment in lab. Middle: Angela Thomure (left), biochemistry and molecular biology senior, and E.C. Nelson identify different substances. Bottom: Justin Cordill (left), Lana Hanes, elementary education junior, Shelbi Guinn, E.C. Nelson, Angela Thomure, and Andrea Gagan, biochemistry and molecular biology freshman, discuss research topics. (Photos by Brian Bendele)