

Wisdom shines bright

Sanders brings unique style to classroom and extension

A tropical print shirt, sandals and khaki pants may not fit into a student's image of an agricultural economics professor, but Larry Sanders is not a typical professor.

His clothes may not reflect the depth of his wisdom, but the salt tones in his salt-and-pepper-colored beard barely begin to tell his story.

Sanders was born into a working class family in Carlsbad, N.M. His father, Lawrence, worked in the potash mining and refining industry, and his mother, Lillian, was a homemaker. Despite his parents' lack of formal education, they instilled in their son the value of higher education.

When Larry Sanders finished high school, he went to college, but he also took a job as a newspaper reporter.

"I didn't have formal reporting classes," Sanders said. "I was given a journalism text to read and then had to go out and act like I knew what I was doing."

Sanders worked as a reporter in Carlsbad for two years before he moved to Laramie, Wyo., to work full-time as a newspaper reporter for a semester. He then enlisted in the U.S. Army.

Sanders said he wanted to serve his country in the military like his father, a World War II veteran. He said he thought this service was the best choice he could make.

He spent 18 months in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, where he learned many tough lessons about life, that gave him some of the wisdom he uses in his classroom today.

"In every crisis you are put in, you are given a gift," said Sanders. "When you find that gift you will begin to get better."

During the war, he learned how to think critically as a lieutenant, lead others and think quickly in critical situations.

"Probably the biggest thing I learned was to know myself and that I could perform in a crisis situation," said Sanders.

Sanders returned to the United States, but he stayed in the military for almost seven years.

"I never intended for it to be a career, and I never intended to be in as long as I was," he said. "But I hadn't decided what to do for a career, so it was a good place to be until I decided."

He took night and weekend classes in California to finish his bachelor's degree in sociology while he continued service in the military.

"I wanted to better understand how the people in institutions around me worked," said Sanders. "I also wanted to learn how to improve the way we live with each other."

Sanders then moved back to New Mexico and worked as a firefighter in the southern New Mexico mountains for one year before he went to New Mexico State University. He studied for his master's degree in agricultural economics there and received his teaching certificate.

About that time, Sanders married. His wife, Linda, helped him "heal from the war." He said she was the only person who understood his feelings.

"My wife was my anchor," Sanders said. "She was the one who helped me when I got back from the war."

Sanders opened his own insurance agency and worked for the next few years selling insurance in New Mexico.

He then left New Mexico for Colorado to work on his doctoral degree in economics.

He focused his studies in the area of natural resources and took advantage of a job opportunity that allowed him to chart scenic rivers in Colorado and do research to complete his dissertation.

"It was a rough job — hiking, kayaking, fishing and mountain biking — but somebody had to do it," Sanders said with a chuckle.

After completing his dissertation in 1985, Oklahoma State University recruited Sanders.

"I was intrigued with the challenges of the job," said Sanders. "I had been helping extension in Colorado as part of my assistantship to help farmers in the farm crisis in the early 1980s, and I saw an opportunity to do the same thing in Oklahoma."

Sanders has worked at OSU for 18 years spending part of his time teaching and part of his time working for the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service to address public policy issues that affect farmers and ranchers in rural communities.

"I develop educational programs to help those audiences become more aware of public policy that affects them," said Sanders. "I work with Congress, the state legislature and farm organizations to consider improvements in legislation."

When there is a new farm bill, Sanders helps

coordinate educational programs about the bill.

Farmers, ranchers and legislative aids contact Sanders to ask questions about pending legislation or legislation recently passed.

Sanders travels professionally to other states and countries including Russia, Turkey, Japan and Mexico.

"My first love is the students in the classroom, but I love working with real world problems and the people of Oklahoma who are in the food and fiber sector," said Sanders.

Students can easily see Sanders' love for teaching through the energy he brings to his classes.

"If you have the opportunity to take one of his classes, you better jump on it," said Jeff Blake, agricultural education senior from Perry, Okla. "He is just a great person and a great teacher."

Sanders teaches agricultural policy and ethical issues in agriculture and the environment, but said he enjoys teaching his natural resources class the most.

"I want to try to help other people solve problems," Sanders said.

Students agree Sanders is full of

wit, knowledge and wisdom.

"Not only did Dr. Sanders challenge us academically, but he also challenged us morally to be the best people we can be both academically and personally," said Afton Jameson, agricultural communications senior.

Sanders said learning about agricultural economics might not be the most interesting thing students do. That is why he finds different ways to keep the class interesting.

"I try to bring speakers into the class to make sure the students are aware of what is going on in the real world," said Sanders.

He also tries to have team projects and encourages his students to bring in current event issues, which help him make real-world applications.

"I used to hike and write for enjoyment in my spare time," said Sanders, "but as you can see, class and extension work take a lot of time."

Sanders has no plans to retire soon. Instead, he will continue to surprise students when he arrives in relaxed clothes, armed with knowledge that will help students for a lifetime. ♦

By Ross Walker, Lancaster, Ohio

