Resolution on the Retirement of Professor of Physics Leon Gunther
May 15, 2013

Some things were simpler in the 1960’s. With a fresh doctorate in theoretical solid state physics from MIT, Leon Gunther needed a job, so he went to a pay phone and called Julian Knipp, the department chair at Tufts, to see if he had any openings. Knipp said no, but invited him to come by anyway. “No” turned into “yes,” and in September 1965 Leon began his long and distinguished career as a faculty member at Tufts. Forty-eight years later we celebrate not the end of that career, but his entry into its next phase.

Everyone who knows Leon is struck by the range of subjects, both within and beyond physics, that he finds “delicious” and will eagerly discuss with knowledge, insight and humor. As a theoretical physicist, he has worked extensively in superconductivity, magnetism, thermodynamics, quantum tunneling and low-dimensional systems. But his mind ranges even further. A colleague wrote, “From Brownian motion to chaos to non-linearity in hearing, to how the tallest trees get their water, to quantum computers, he is always thinking about intriguing problems. He is an exemplar of a theoretical physicist, applying his extensive analytical skills to whatever captures his interest. And that is a vast array of phenomena. His mind is quick. His insights are deep.”

The same versatility is a hallmark of Leon’s teaching. Over the years he has taught nearly every course in the department, from basic courses for non-scientists to the most advanced graduate courses. He brings the same curiosity, energy and probing intelligence to teaching physics that he applies to doing physics, always eager to discuss an interesting problem, teaching strategy, or student comment.

One course, The Physics of Music and Color, will always be Leon’s baby. Developed with Gary Goldstein as a two-week experimental class during a Winter Study term that Tufts adopted to save energy during the oil crisis of the 1970s, it was expanded into a full semester class that succeeded, as Gary put it, “because of Leon’s untiring devotion to understanding and explaining the subtlest phenomena.” The class certainly didn’t conserve Leon’s energy – he put unending effort into devising and refining laboratories, computer exercises, and ultimately a published textbook, all to make a subject of great intricacy and complexity not only accessible but fascinating to students with little background in math or physics.

It is no accident that Leon’s signature class unites his passions for physics and music. He is an accomplished violinist whose knowledge of classical music is, according to a colleague, “probably as great as his knowledge of physics,” which is saying a great deal. At Tufts his musical activities included lunchtime violin-piano sonatas, performances with the Tufts Symphony, and recently singing with the Tufts Jumbo Knish Factory klezmer ensemble.

No reflection on the great gifts that Leon has brought to Tufts could omit his warmth, generosity and kindness. For the sake of brevity, just two stories: A former graduate student recalls arriving in Boston as a political refugee, knowing no one and with no idea where to go. “I knocked on Leon’s door and he took me in, a total stranger, made me his student, got me a tuition waiver and later even a TA. This act of generosity really changed my life.” Former physics professor and provost Kathryn McCarthy recalls returning to the department from her time in administration. “No one could have been as helpful as Leon. In case people do not know, putting physics aside for ten years and then returning is quite difficult. Leon made it possible.”

Leon likes to say that he never “worked,” he simply loved all he did at Tufts – research, teaching, participation in extra-departmental activities too numerous to recount here. As he makes the transition to a more relaxed stage of his remarkable career, his colleagues look forward to having the continued benefit of his insight, enthusiasm, wisdom, generosity, and music.

On behalf of the Department of Physics and Astronomy, be it resolved that this resolution on the retirement of Leon Gunther be spread on the minutes of the faculty of Arts and Science, and that copies of it be sent to our honored colleague and his family.