

Former Grounds Keeper Cultivated More Than the Campus

"When I was young, my grandmother gave each grandkid a patch of land where we planted easy-to-grow vegetables and flowers such as radishes and marigolds," he said as he twirled the bottom button of his brown cardigan sweater between his thumb and index finger. "We had competitions to see who put the first radish or flower on the table. That's where I learned my love for nature."

That love for nature led **George Vaclavek** to Oklahoma City University when he accepted the position of superintendent of grounds in 1963. In addition to the duties of grounds keeper, he also became a mentor, a student advocate and, according to **Jim Stuber** (BSB '72), a molder of men during his 18 years with the University.

"I always thought that he was the molder of men," Stuber said. "He challenged these kids and gave them jobs when they needed them. He gave them tasks and enabled them to find pleasure in following them through."

Vaclavek built a work force of students to maintain the grounds. In doing so, he feels he helped them form greater ties to the campus and gain respect for it because they contributed to its beautification. At the same time, these students had the opportunity to earn money and learn about life and landscaping.

"For many of these students it was their first job, and George taught them good work ethics in a positive way," said **Bruce Rosier** (former student).

One testimony to that is **Scott Sheppard** (BSB '73), who after planting a tree told Vaclavek "This is the first thing I've done that's given me a sense of accomplishment. If I ever have a son, I'm going to bring him here and show this tree to him." Sheppard did just that when he was named the University's Distinguished Alumnus during homecoming ceremonies in 1995.

Vaclavek listened when stu-

dents confided in him, and he often relayed student concerns to Dr. Dolphus Whitten when the former University president invited him to dinner.

He also designed what he calls "retreats," areas in which students could spend time outside, from benches for studying and visiting with friends to a field for gatherings and playing Frisbee. He labored as much over the flowers and shrubs in these areas as he did the plants and trees at the president's house or in front of new campus buildings.

"And I always put their school work first. I wanted them to make good grades, even if it meant less work for them and more work for me during exam time," said the soft-spoken gardener.

The magnitude of his desire to help others presented itself when his blue eyes moistened beneath his wire-frame glasses and he rumbled his brow as he talked about the suffering he witnessed as a private first class in the Army during World War II. The wrinkles on his face are few for a man born before The Great Depression.

"You never know when you do a good turn how it might come back to you," he said. Several of his protégés, such as Rosier, have helped him in various ways.

"My dad passed away shortly after I left OCU, and George kind of took me under his wing," said Rosier, who transferred to Oklahoma State University to pursue veterinary school.

He and his wife Fran include Vaclavek in holiday celebrations with their family and throw birthday parties for him. Rosier also gave Vaclavek a West Highland Terrier named Skipper for whom he provides veterinary services free of charge.

A bachelor, Vaclavek lives in Oklahoma City with Skipper and several birds he took in during his time at OCU, including Ace and Groucho, two Amazon parrots many students befriended.

"The fellows taught Groucho to swear, which embarrassed me," he said through his laughter. "And I still have Elizabeth, a blind cockatoo that I took from the zoo when they were going to put her to sleep. I've had her for about 30 years."

He positioned his right ankle on his left knee and methodically traced the seam of his jeans with his steady fingers as he spoke of his ties to OCU's chapter of the Lambda Chi Fraternity and how he had been made an honorary member.

"I never had time to join a fraternity while I was pursuing my bachelor's degree in agriculture at the University of Illinois. I had to work full-time, which left little time for anything other than studying," he said.

Lambda Chi **Vince Orza** (BSB '71 and OCU trustee) described Vaclavek as "a bit of a big brother — more like a father figure — to an awful lot of boys who go to college and try to become men; boys who are a long way from home and need somebody to keep them on 'the straight and narrow.'"

"George is great at that," Orza continued. "A surrogate father to a lot of us, he taught us hard work, he taught us pride, and he taught us love for the University."

Vaclavek remains active with the Lambda Chi house on campus, helping its young members with yard work and important lessons in life. Since retirement, he has also worked on the planting design for the canal area of the Oklahoma City MAPS project and is currently working on the landscaping for a 30-acre regional park in Ardmore, Okla., both with friend and fellow horticulturist JoAnn Vervinck.

The skills and efforts of the self-proclaimed "plant nut" have been noted by his peers and rewarded. He serves as a speaker to various garden clubs throughout the state. During his time with the University, he received the Award of Excellence from Oklahoma City Beautiful for his work on the campus. His own front yard has been featured in "Oklahoma Today" magazine and in a video made for a program at Oklahoma State University.

Vaclavek takes pride in having passed his knowledge and love for nature on to the students who worked for him. He hopes they will use this knowledge by spending quality time with their children and grandchildren, planting in them the same seeds his grandmother planted in him. ●

George Vaclavek, OCU superintendent of grounds, 1963-81