A Farmer/Philosopher Retires

Bernard “Buck” den Ouden, professor of philosophy in the College of Arts and Sciences, doesn’t indulge in social media. “I prefer face-to-face conversation,” he says.

But when asked what image would best represent him on a social media website, he points to a line drawing of himself teaching a classroom of rapt students. Drawn by a former student, the picture captures the essence of a farmer/philosopher who has turned his passions into a rewarding 43-year career at the University.

Den Ouden’s warmth and ability to connect with his students inspire them to succeed. Daniel Hultgren ’09 says, “It’s very difficult to do justice to the amount of influence that Professor den Ouden has had upon me. If it weren’t for him, I never would have begun studying philosophy, which later became one of the primary reasons that I was granted UHart’s Martin Scholarship to study at [University of] Oxford and immigrate to the UK [United Kingdom].”

Den Ouden also has given guest lectures abroad; consulted on development projects in Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Guatemala, and the Dominican Republic; and taken students to Minnesota to study the Sioux culture and to assist farmers in Kenya. He is a recipient of one of the University’s highest honors, the Roy E. Larson Award for Excellence in Teaching.

If den Ouden were having a conversation with you, here’s some of what he would say:

1940s
A PHILOSOPHER IS BORN

As I child, I worked on large farming machines—combines and tractors. I was 8 years old when I started. It was hard work. But, to paraphrase James Taylor, I could also work on a daydream. I started college in engineering, but in my second year, fell in love with philosophy. I love it because it’s extremely difficult and, most of all, because it deals with the fundamental questions we face: What does it mean to be human? Can we create rational communities and just societies? What is our relationship to the cosmos at large?

1969
A PROFESSOR TAKES FORM

I love philosophy so much that my passion for the subject matter made teaching a natural progression. In my third year of graduate school, I had an opportunity to teach philosophy at Eastern Connecticut State University. I enjoyed it. After the course was completed, I was offered a full-time position at the University (of Hartford).

1969-2012
Pursuit of Excellence

I am convinced that the pursuit of excellence is the way human beings enjoy themselves most deeply and most profoundly. I also just find my fellow human beings interesting. Teaching is one of the most hopeful professions. I insist that students take their education seriously. And most of them rise to the occasion.

FIELD STUDY AS RESEARCH

One of the things I have prided about the University is that it has encouraged different kinds of research. It has allowed field study in all kinds of areas. Field study has been the basis of the 80 to 90 papers that I have written.

WHY I STAYED

I stayed at the University for so long because it was young when I started, and I wanted to help (with my colleagues) to make it work, make it better, put it on the map.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

My most memorable times here have been and are when I hear from former students as to what they are doing and how their study with me made a difference. Sometimes it takes your breath away when you hear what they have done with what you put before them.

NEXT

A public intellectual has a special responsibility. There are so many issues to deal with, some of which I have addressed in the four books I have written (Language and Creativity; Essays on Reason, Will, Creativity, and Time; The Fusion of Naturalism and Humanism; Are Freedom and Dignity Possible?). I love to write. Retirement will enable me to prioritize that. Writing is part of who I am.

Editor’s note: Those who wish to honor Professor den Ouden may make a gift to the Bernard den Ouden Honors Scholarship fund, which provides support for all students in the honors program, by contacting Toni Robinson, director of donor relations, at robinson@hartford.edu or 860.768.2345.