'Bug Man' Retires From Teaching, Stays on With Insect Collection

College of Agriculture and Life Sciences
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At the end of the hall and along a corridor of the **Department of Entomology** [1] in the **College of Agriculture and Life Sciences** [2] is the office of Associate Curator Carl A. Olson, also known as the "Bug Man."

Located on the fourth floor of the University of Arizona's Forbes building, the department transports visitors to a world where plants and insects outnumber people exponentially. The fourth floor may be distant from the rest of reality, but the Bug Man is never alone among 2 million bug specimens in what is considered to be the biggest insect collection in Arizona and the largest Southwest insect collection in the country.

"Carl has worked in the UA Insect Collection for 38 years in various roles, most recently as the associate curator," said Wendy Moore, a UA entomology assistant professor and present curator of the insect collection. "His passion has helped to grow the UAIC (**University of Arizona Insect Collection** [3]) into the largest and best-identified insect collection in Arizona."

Olson's love for insects began when he and his older brother collected caterpillars and silk moths in the Ohio countryside. He learned how to obtain females, wait for their eggs to hatch and provide the needed food plants for the newly born caterpillars to survive.

"My mother let me have half the garage and I'd have jars full of caterpillars," Olson said. "It was so amazing to watch these big green worms spin a cocoon, pupate inside and come out as these amazing moths. Metamorphosis was outrageous because we're dull growing up, but here were these bugs that were incredible."

Although his older brother eventually grew out of their bug-collecting phase, Olson did not. His interest flew out of his mother's garage and entered his high school classroom.

"My interest in bugs grew with a good biology teacher I had in high school," Olson said. "He became my mentor when I got my master's degree because we managed to stay in touch."

Olson attended Miami University in Ohio, earning a bachelor's degree in biology. He went on to get his master's in zoology at Marshall University. Eventually he moved to California, where he worked for a biological control company.

"Our job was to grow parasites and predators that could be given to field representatives as a way to manage populations of bugs in a natural way and to keep them from consuming crops," Olson said. "The excessive use of pesticides may not be solving our problems, but rather exacerbating them. Predators and parasites, bacteria and fungi can help keep populations at equilibrium."

While terminating insects with Raid is the initial instinct of many people, Olson has dedicated his career to using alternative ways to solve the insect problems people face. He is a believer in programs promoting "integrated pest management," or IPM.

"I wanted to get the public schools away from pesticide use and make them a healthier environment for kids since they are still developing and they shouldn't have that environment to grow up in," Olson said. "The key to being a good IPM person is being a good detective and finding out why there's a problem and then solving it. We can ask, 'What is it that we're giving the pests? Food, water, a niche, or access to this niche?' Then we can change it. And by changing, you don't have to go out and kill them. "

Olson has tried to implement change since his arrival at the UA in July 1975. He started educating others through his own insect ID clinic.

"The public would call and ask questions about insects because most people are not educated about the bug world so there is a lot of fear, paranoia and misinformation that makes people upset when they encounter bugs," Olson said.

His efforts continue today. The array of bug species Olson is asked to identify depends on the season and the effects of the climate in the area.

"In late spring, I identify bugs â€“ from giant mesquite bugs to cicadas and scorpions," Olson said. "Late spring consists of false chinch bugs, milkweed bugs and et cetera. In the summer, I see palo verde root borers, mesquite twig girdlers and too many others to note. In urban areas I usually identify crickets, dermestid beetles and other household bugs. I don't get much about roaches anymore because the city and I worked on a total management policy that keeps roaches under control."

A curator and a public figure, Olson's roles came to include teaching as he began molding the minds of students who

showed an interest in entomology.

"I started teaching aquatic entomology because I had a background as a master's student in aquatics," Olson said. "Then in 1983, I was asked to teach the non-majors' beginning course, which I taught for 16 years."

The Bug Man officially retired on Jan. 31. He'll continue to curate the insects in the collection and will also help with Department of Entomology renovations to make room for the growing number of specimens in the collection.

"The bug world is what I am," Olson said. "I'll still be helping other people and that is how I've learned, by interacting with others."

With so many bugs to learn about, Olson does not have a favorite, as each bug is special to him, he said.

From a little boy with caterpillars to a full grown "bug man," Olson has metamorphosed into a person whose life consists of continuous learning and the sharing of his knowledge to help others see the world from a different perspective.

"Whether it's about Arizona, the Sonoran Desert or the U.S., I just keep learning and sharing and that broadens all the things I get to teach other people. Being able to influence a lot of people, to open their eyes to the natural world, was the most fulfilling part of my career," Olson said. "It's fun to get different people and different professions to look at the small and to appreciate things that they didn't before. I think I've influenced a lot of people in that way, whether it be adult or kid."

Links
[1] http://ag.arizona.edu/ento/ [2] http://cals.arizona.edu/main/ [3] http://ag.arizona.edu/ento/UAIC/index.html