In Memoriam: William S. Bickel, University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Physics

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William S. Bickel, a University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Physics who taught at the UA for more than 50 years, died on June 1 from complications of Parkinson's disease. He was 80.

A celebration of his life was held on June 24.

Bickel, a native of Ottsville, Pennsylvania, earned bachelor's and doctoral degrees in physics from Pennsylvania State University. He joined the UA Department of Physics faculty in 1965.

Bickel received numerous teaching awards during his tenure, including the UA's Five Star Faculty Award in 1990. He was named a University Distinguished Professor in 1997. He officially retired in 2002, but remained active in teaching and research for more than a decade afterward.

Bickel quickly became known, colleagues and former students said, as a dynamic teacher who strived to make serious physics research accessible and fun for all students, regardless of their major or involvement in the department.

"He was a teacher's teacher," said Sumit Mazumdar, professor and head of the physics department. "He really believed that the only way to know something 100 percent is to be a teacher."

Bickel even offered to teach classes for free, and did so for several years after his retirement, Mazumdar said.

"He had the ability to not just teach the material. He had the ability to give you physical intuition," said Brian Schmidt, a former student who graduated in 1989 with bachelor's degrees in physics and astronomy, and winner of the 2011 Nobel Prize in Physics. "That was something that he was remarkably unique in doing. That physical intuition helps you understand and solve physics at a very deep level."

Anthony Pitucco was a physics student when he first met Bickel in 1966. He later became a colleague as a physics professor at Pima Community College. Pitucco said he spent his career trying to emulate Bickel's teaching style, which he described as creative, eloquent, hands-on and easy to follow.

"He could see internal strengths somehow," Pitucco said. "There was a magic about him pulling out of a student a quality that the student may not have recognized they had. And when that happens, the student becomes the teacher."
Bickel helped create Physics Phun Nite, the department’s largest outreach event, which makes physics accessible to the general public, and especially children, through interactive activities.

It was at a Physics Phun Night when Erik Herman, a student at the time, met Bickel. Bickel urged him to take his experimental physics class and later invited him and other students to use the “treasure trove” of equipment he kept in his labs to explore and experiment. Bickel would meet with Herman weekly to go over discoveries he had made. Herman, who graduated in 1997 with a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and a minor in physics, said he remained involved in physics because of Bickel.

"He brought a life and personality to the subject that resonated with me," Herman said. "He was the one that made me see that, in higher education, physics could still be experienced and explored and learned through direct observation."

Bickel's gift for teaching, some said, came from his own love of learning.

"Bill had a heart the size of Tucson," Pitucco said. "His desire to learn and to relearn and to teach, it was never-ending. He was a true progenitor of lifelong learning."

Other memories shared from former colleagues and students:

"He liked his physics, but he loved people, too. I think that's another key to why he left a strong impression on a lot of people." ? Bruce Bayly, UA associate professor of mathematics

"He would see students who had a hunger for learning about the universe, understanding the laws of the universe, and he would want to help those students. I was one of those students." ? Alaina Levine, UA alumna, president and founder of Quantum Success Solutions

"Physics seems hard and it is hard, but he was able to reduce it to its bare minimum and make it approachable and understandable. And he was just a clever, funny guy. So, we owe a lot to clever, funny people who make things that are hard seem approachable." ? Paul Sheppard, UA associate professor of dendrochronology

Bickel is survived by his wife of 41 years, Barbara Otke Bickel, of Tucson; sister Arleen Watkins of Tucson; brother Donald Bickel of Lincoln, Montana; and the extended Bickel and Otke families.

In lieu of flowers, contributions can be made to: Parkinson Wellness Recovery; the William and Barbara Bickel Trustee Scholarship in the Eberly College of Science at Penn State, 814-863-2052; or the William S. Bickel Graduate Fellowship in Physics at the UA Foundation.

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