Professor Jan Dykstra Plans a Scholarship Endowment for Menlo Students

Now that Alumni Relations Director Emerita and good friend Dorothy Skala has officially retired, Professor Jan Dykstra will tell you that he is very proud to be the oldest member of the Menlo family still working with students on campus.

Born in Indonesia, Professor Dykstra grew up in Holland as the son of a Dutch administrator for a large American company. His mother was from the United States, and the family made a few trips to California before he made his decision to go to college there in 1948. “I knew I wanted to teach geography and history,” said Dykstra, “so I did my undergraduate and graduate studies at UCLA where I majored in Journalism and Political Science.” Dykstra got his first job at KLM Royal Dutch Airlines in New York. A short time later, he decided to return to California to take a job with Southern Pacific where he learned the transportation industry and was able to travel internationally—now one of his favorite hobbies.

Professor Jan Dykstra, however, wanted to teach. A placement bureau at UC Berkeley recommended an open teaching position at Menlo College, and the rest is history. “When I was hired in 1963 as a professor of language and social sciences, Kratt was president,” remembered Dykstra. “I was given a little apartment in El Camino North, and dorm supervision was assigned as part of my duties. I had to stop a party once. I don’t know how many bottles of good whiskey I had to dump down the bathroom sink. I also helped one of my students out of big trouble, just before Commencement, when he was caught making wine in an abandoned dorm room. He later got his graduate degree in winemaking from UC Davis and now he has his own winery!”

“Mr. J. Wayne Crooks [economics and psychology professor] also lived in Howard with Mrs. Crooks, who was an excellent cook, and the students and I were often invited to dinner,” smiled Jan. “Weaver—known as “the Weave”—was also a gourmet cook and practiced his new recipes on the students. Gene Bales lived upstairs in Michaels while finishing his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Stanford. He needed language for his exam, so I taught him German. And our soccer coach, Señor Carlos López, lived downstairs in Michaels with his wonderful family,” Dykstra mused. “Carlos and I shared a faculty office, and we became best friends. I still miss Carlos very much every day. We were very close.”

In those days Menlo was very much a family situation,” Dykstra continued, “just like the east coast prep schools. Judge Russell told the Menlo faculty and staff that we were “in loco parentis,” meaning “instead of parents,” and so we managed everything from broken love affairs to discipline problems. I was a lecturer, and in those days Menlo had follow-up discussion groups to support the lectures. These groups were aptly led by Dr. Fisher, Tobin with his Texas drawl, Joe Bertrand…” Dykstra trailed off, smiling.

“I’ll tell you something about Jan he probably won’t mention,” said Michael Lilly, ’66, when interviewed in Hawaii recently about his friend. “I was one of a group of five swimmers, four of which had taken water polo in high school. We formed a team and needed a coach, and recruited Jan, who knew nothing about water polo. We taught him to coach as we went along, and became quite an established team! I majored in sociology because of Jan Dykstra. He is one of the best professors Menlo College has ever produced, and was a peerless student mentor.”

Although he formally retired in 1996, Professor Dykstra continues to mentor, tutor and advise students. Mike Lilly has been Jan Dykstra’s close friend and lawyer over many years, and has worked closely with Jan to establish a generous scholarship endowment for Menlo College students through his estate plan.