A Dane for All Seasons

A Friends' Personality

by

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Some of his colleagues affectionately call him the "Great Dane." The title describes Gordon Eriksen admirably. He towers over the crowd, is most solidly built, has a resounding voice, an infectious personality, and a definite presence wherever he goes. Born among the hearty Scandinavian souls of St. Paul, Minnesota, he and his family moved within a few years to Graham, Texas where he graduated from high school in 1939. Two years later, he began what would be a life-long association with institutions of higher education when he enrolled at the University of Oklahoma. The times, however, caught him up and after completing two years of college, he joined the U.S. Army Air Corps and served through World War II until 1946. With the useful assistance of post-war funding for veterans, he then returned to academic study and earned the first two of several degrees, a B.A. in English and, in 1950, the B.F.A. in drama.

A few years of career exploration took him to the firm decision to become an educator. The first step included a teaching certificate in 1957, and into the classrooms of high schools across the country. As he notes, "I never had a class I did not like." Even the challenge of 26 high school senior boys who had been labeled "Do Not Admits" proved his love for teaching—and his ability to instruct and influence those who sat in his classes. During the 1950s, he began a correspondence with students, now friends, that continues to this day.

Turning from high school to higher academe, Gordon took the time to complete a M.A. in English literature in 1967, and six years later, earned the Ph.D., also in English literature, from the University of Colorado in Boulder where his dissertation dissected the life of George Fitzmaurice, an Irish playwright from the turn of the century. No one is surprised to learn that Dr. Eriksen was an avid reader as a child, and that this avocation still dominates his life.

After teaching at the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, for a number of years, Dr. Eriksen concluded that a slight refocusing of his career was desirable. He headed a hundred or so miles east to the University of Illinois at Urbana/Champaign where, in his 50s, he earned the Master of Science in library science. He then sought out a graduate school of library science where teaching and his enchantment with books blended into a perfect vocation. WMU's School of Library and Information Science employed him as the reference and bibliography specialist in 1976. When the School was closed, Gordon made a logical transfer into the Central Reference Department of the University Libraries where he was able to put library theory into practice, teach, and have access to an infinite array of literary works.

Separate from his decades of teaching and literary exploration, Dr. Eriksen has a breadth of other interests. One of his greatest passions is music. Everyone in the family learned to read music, and Gordon inherited a fine voice from his father. He first participated in the church choir, then his undergraduate university chorus, and eventually the Houston Chorale. In fact, he claims that the most important moments in his life have centered on music. Needless to say, his musical knowledge is impressive. Not only has he attended hundreds of concerts, but he has served on several boards including the Kalamazoo Junior Symphony and Bach Festival Society of Kalamazoo, and has provided special support to the Fontana Concert Society.

Gordon loves almost all classical or serious musical offerings, but if pressed, will admit that his particular favorite is opera. He can call forth dozens of recollections of famous singers including the thrill of hearing Maria Callas sing in her first two American seasons. His enthusiasm for the operatic format is documented by trips to Chicago to enjoy the Lyric Opera, or visits with friends in Santa Cruz, California, so that he could attend the San Francisco Opera. On most Saturday afternoons, he will not answer his phone as he listens to the Metropolitan on WMUK.

A second major love that has taken him outside the halls of academic is that of travel. That love is simply explained: "I come by it honestly—I'm a Viking!" The Eriksen wanderlust has led him to accomplish a rare feat—he has visited each and every COUNTY in the continental United States, and only four counties in Hawaii are left before his map of the U.S.A. is totally blocked out. Friends know that it is only a matter of time before the 6'2" figure, in an aloha shirt and matching lei,
steps onto the soil of the 50th state. Gordon thinks he retired from WMU in 1990, but that really isn't true. Back in the busy months when Waldo Libray was being rebuilt and expanded, Assistant Dean Bettina Meyer and Gordon, along with some colleagues, began the planning for the first Friends of the University Libraries organization at WMU. Staff member Bill Smith and Gordon drafted a constitution, called together interested individuals, and, ergo, the Friends became a reality. No officer has probably contributed as much time and effort to the Friends as has Gordon—especially when the semi-annual book sales are at hand. Not only does he assist in collecting, marking, moving, and displaying the items, but he's invariably at the scene—a salesman par excellence.

One might expect that Gordon would have little time for anything else given the interests just noted, but currently he is involved in organizing the library at the Hospice of Greater Kalamazoo. Over the years, boxes of materials had been collected and ignored at the Hospice headquarters. Every item is being reviewed and cataloged so that the staff and patrons can find and use the information. Most recently, he began mentoring third grade children at the North Glade Elementary School. These mentees are at-risk students who need academic and social guidance. This means that he also teaches them, and will occur.

So, "why is that book up here?" is understood when the patron/user knows that this non-circulating research collection is kept under controlled temperature and humidity conditions. That book is here so that it can survive the acid burn of our contemporary environment, so that it can remain in the physical state in which it left the publisher’s warehouse for as long as possible. That book is here so that not only the text remains readable, but that its bibliographical integrity is intact. That book is the actual volume that the author created and approved through the publication process. The patron who visits Waldo Library in the next week, the next century, or the next millennium will be able to handle and read that book. Rare in its selectivity and uniqueness, special in its form and availability—and that, in short, is why!

"What is more important in a library than anything else — than everything else — is the fact that it exists."

—Archibald Macleish