Northland College Professor Makes an Impact with his Last Lecture

-By Angie Behling

What if it was your last day at work, at school, at someplace you’ve loved for years? What would you say? How would you say your goodbyes? What would you want people to gain from your speech, remember from it?

People may ponder this and come up short, but that is one of the few things that Professor Clayton Russell did not accomplish with his pseudo “Last Lecture” at Northland College in late January. While not actually his last lecture at Northland, he gave it all the effort that one would give the real thing, and at the same time created a memory that will last for many years to come.

The “Last Lecture” sponsored by the Northland College Student Association and the Academic Affairs office is new at Northland College. The professor is nominated by students and asked to prepare a lecture as if it was his or her last lecture ever.

As a member of the Northland community for over 15 years, Professor Russell had a lot to share, but chose the most important ‘bits and pieces’ to impart to his large audience. He began his speech with the traditional thanking of friends, family, co-workers, and students, and that is where all the similarities stopped. What followed was a truly unique and inspiring mix of humor, thankfulness, and wisdom.

He began by explaining to the audience exactly what was involved in this speech: appetizers, several courses to make up the main meal, and a small dessert to finish it off. He also told the audience the three options they had to leave with which included a “hollow log” full of ideas, an “acorn cap” with some ideas rattling around inside, or with a “pocket of dirt, fur, and coyote droppings.” How anyone could have left with anything less than a full “hollow log” is beyond comprehension.

The main course started with a discussion about the relativity of time; “…time is not money and time does not pass...” as Professor Russell so eloquently put it. One of the main points of this course was that all the hurry in so many of our lives is the cause of the many problems that keep appearing and growing in everyone’s lives. The second course was entitled “walking the talk.” This entrée referred to words as “units of power”, discussed the power of walking, and not only walking, but following your own paths. Demonstrating the humor he so delicately laced through his speech he told the audience to “feel free to resonate,” and demonstrated with several twists of the hip; just in case there was any confusion. The next course was concerned with paying attention and using this to “find your place in that circle,” finding the place where you belong.

The grand finale, though just a “small dessert,” was one of the most memorable parts of the presentation. He may be ‘done’ but “we still have work to do.” Through his career he has been involved in teaching, canoeing, and most importantly, protecting the environment, just to name a few of his many accomplishments and hobbies. He referred to them as “my passion, and I hope they will be yours.” Protecting the environment cannot just stop, it is an ongoing process, one we can all fall in love with and support. And as he so brilliantly put it, “you could fall in love with far less.”

Angie Behling is a student at Northland College.