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One of the Nation's Best

Mardi Mileham
Linfield College

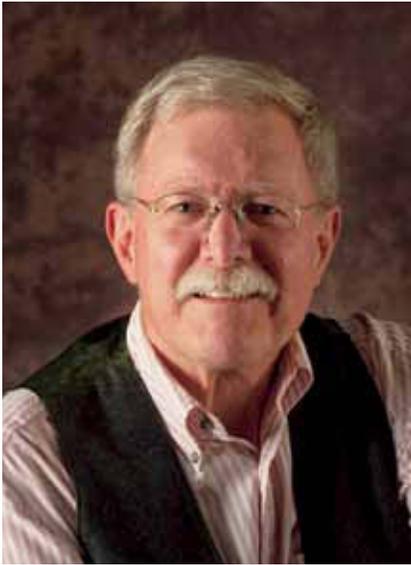
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One of the nation's best



Peter Richardson file

B.A., Stanford University

M.A., Ohio State University

M. Phil., Ph.D., Yale University

Edith Green Professor, 1987-88,
2008-09

Colloquium advisor since 1987

Favorite writer: John McPhee

Family: Wife, Beverly, two
daughters, Laura and Jennifer

"The kind of work we do here is really crucial to our students because it is here they come of age," Peter Richardson says. "They are growing into their adult selves and making decisions about themselves and the things that are important in the world. It is a tremendous privilege to be on the same stage with these students. It's a great privilege to help them as they make their decisions."

When Peter Richardson rose to be recognized as Oregon's Professor of the Year during an awards luncheon in Washington, D.C., he felt surrounded by his colleagues who were in their classrooms 3,000 miles away.

"I felt as if my department were there with me, and beyond them, the entire faculty and spreading throughout the room were my current and former students and this wonderful flood of Linfield people," he said.

Richardson has taught for 45 years – more than 30 of them at Linfield. In November, he became the first Linfield faculty member to be named Oregon Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education.

For Richardson, it wasn't about the personal recognition, but rather about the faculty and the college.

"When I first heard the news, I thought 'what a wonderful thing for Linfield,'" he said. "This is a great validation of what we do. We have been so under-appreciated for so long; this was a great acknowledgment of all the things that have been going on here.

"Good teaching is our stock in trade. That's how we recruit and keep our students," he added. "The ceremony really underscored for me the essence of what we do and the importance of what we do. The award is a validation of that."

Student impact

Richardson's courses are as fun as they are rigorous.

His rolling laugh is contagious. He surprises first-year Inquiry Seminar students by speaking with a Southern accent. Props such as cow bells and hand-carved butter churns are common. He shares his love of music and singing by teaching students German folk songs. On the annual German immersion weekend he shows students how to make German noodles and invites each of them to take a turn. He does not just teach language, he teaches about culture and life, and demonstrates how language spills over into literature, history, anthropology, religion, politics and sociology.

Teaching touches every aspect of his life. Some of his most important lessons have been shared when students sit in his legendary rocking chair to discuss academic and personal triumphs and challenges. So many students have sunk into the worn, wooden rocker in his office that they wore out the bottom. He lugged in another. Students come seeking advice and leave, not with answers, but with ideas or suggestions that will help them find their own path on their journey.

"When we talk, he is not insistent, but rather offers advice that may be taken or not," said Julianne Upton '10, a German minor and mathematics major. "Instead of pushing me to pursue more diverse interests, he suggests ideas and waits for them to take root. Instead of pushing me down the 'best' path, he lets me find my own way."

Daniel Clausen '08 called Richardson an "unending inspiration" and said he shaped his undergraduate years more than any other professor.

"The ability to enlighten while maintaining a degree of lightheartedness makes him a legendary favorite," he said. "He shepherds students not only into new fields of knowledge, but he sets them free into new self-con-



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fidence, self-criticism and self-motivation. It is his ability to profoundly impact the lives of his individual students and his fellow faculty members that sets him apart.”

Many of his colleagues know Richardson as both mentor and friend and talk of his quick wit and sharp intellect as well as his compassion, curiosity, selflessness, energy, enthusiasm and love of language. They talk of ideas shared and lessons learned on walks around campus, during conferences or on hikes in the mountains.

“He is the first and last person we all turn to in time of need,” said Chris Keaveney, associate professor of Japanese. “I believe that whatever I achieve at Linfield will, in large measure, be the result of the mentorship and excellent example that he has provided.”

A flutter of excitement

Even after 45 years, Richardson feels a flutter of excitement each fall when new students arrive. He is the only faculty member to serve as an advisor in the freshman Colloquium, a required one-credit course, since its inception. The enthusiasm of the new students who are just entering college and the students returning from living and studying abroad energizes him.

Each fall he tells new students: “Welcome to Linfield. I hope we don’t see you next year.” Instead, he hopes they will be studying halfway around the world, learning to understand their own culture by experiencing another.

“I love being a witness to the spectacle in my classes and in my rocking chair and having some hand in the direction the students take. I love suggesting things to them they might not have thought of before.”

Students returning from studies abroad face their own culture shock on campus. The Advanced Cross-Cultural Seminar that Richardson helped develop and still leads helps students understand how and why they changed overseas.

The sense of place

Some people remain astounded that 30 years ago Richardson made the decision to leave Yale University to take a position at a small liberal arts college in Oregon. When faced with a choice, he opts for the most interesting path and tells students they must be flexible enough to maintain options. “Place” – where he lives – is important to Richardson. At Linfield he found the perfect combination of place and the opportunity to work with young people.

Three men had profound influence on Richardson’s life: his father, a paleontologist at the Field Museum in Chicago, who cultivated his son’s love of languages, and two former professors at Ohio State and Yale. From them he learned the importance of finding your own place in the world and that becoming a human is a lifelong lesson.

“They taught by example, and I think teaching by example rather than by requirement is by far the most powerful tool that we can use to help our students.”

Richardson shares those lessons with his students and his colleagues. Whether it’s building his barn, playing the banjo, teaching at Linfield or spending summers in a tiny village in the Swiss Alps where he has deciphered and transcribed some 1,300 documents for the local residents, he has found his place by always taking the most interesting path.

“As far as I know, we have one shot at this and we should do what we love,” he said. ■

– Mardi Mileham

His place in the Alps



Even as Peter Richardson tries to help his students find their place in the world, he has taken his own advice to heart.

He has found his own place in the world beyond McMinnville – in the Swiss Alps. Since 1969, he and his wife, Beverly, return yearly to a village so small it barely registers on the map.

For the past five years Richardson has deciphered and transcribed 1,300 documents. The documents, hundreds of years old, include love poems and letters, gravestone inscriptions, milk delivery lists, forest regulations, wine receipts, poorhouse documents, cattle certificates and magic incantations. He has even transcribed a household guide to scripture written by religious renegade Martin Luther. “Someone found it in a drawer,” he said.

The documents have been neglected for generations; paper has decayed, ink has faded and careless folds obscure crucial passages. Compounding the difficulty of transcription, let alone reading, is the archaic handwriting in an alphabet that died out in the early 1900s.

“Some authors used vocabulary that was quaint, self-important, overly Calvinistic or just plain bombastic,” Richardson said. “On the other hand, the quill pens of children have left us touchingly simple and eloquent memories of school days.

“Many letters tear at your heart,” Richardson added. “They were written by people who were not educated, but their language betrays genuine sentiment that is well expressed. Every new document is another person’s take on the human condition, and those papers of a personal nature enable the writer to step off the page.”