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Touching Lives in the Classroom

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Touching lives in the classroom

As a young man growing up in Seattle, Wash., Daniel O'Leary '86 set his sights on medical school.

But his studies at Linfield and an internship at IBM spurred other interests. Today, he is a Ph.D. rather than an M.D., an award-winning associate professor of chemistry at Pomona College in Claremont, Calif.

O'Leary graduated magna cum laude from Linfield with a B.A. in chemistry and biology. He earned a Ph.D. in chemistry from UCLA in 1991. As a graduate student, he won the 1988 American Chemical Society Organic Division Fellowship and UCLA's 1991 Winstein Dissertation Prize. A postdoctoral stint at Harvard completed his formal training.

Since 1994, he has taught chemistry at Pomona, a college that shares Linfield's emphasis on undergraduate education. In 1997 and 2003, he received Pomona's highest teaching award. And in 2003 he also won the college's Irvine Distinguished Faculty Mentor Award.

O'Leary said he was the first person in his family to attend a small college.

"My high school track coach got me thinking about Linfield," he said, "and I figured he wouldn't steer me wrong. He told me one thing about Linfield was that all the people he'd met from there were great people. I fell in love with the small college atmosphere and made a decision that I wanted to teach at a place like Linfield."

A nationally recognized organic chemist, O'Leary specializes in nuclear magnetic resonance spectroscopy, which he translates as "a cousin of MRI (magnetic resonance imaging). It's a cutting-edge way to look at molecular structure." He is interested in the synthesis and study of chemically modified biological structures. These investigations are funded by the National Science Foundation and by The Camille and Henry Dreyfus Foundation.

With no graduate school at Pomona, O'Leary involves undergraduates in his research. "They make it happen in the laboratory and then get to communicate their results at meetings and in scientific papers," he said. Four of his recent papers have appeared in the prestigious *Journal of the American Chemical Society*.

The close student-faculty relationships in a smaller college pay off, O'Leary said. "Students from small colleges have unique skills when they go to graduate school. They know how to do

research. They're comfortable around professors. They're able to successfully operate in an intellectual environment."

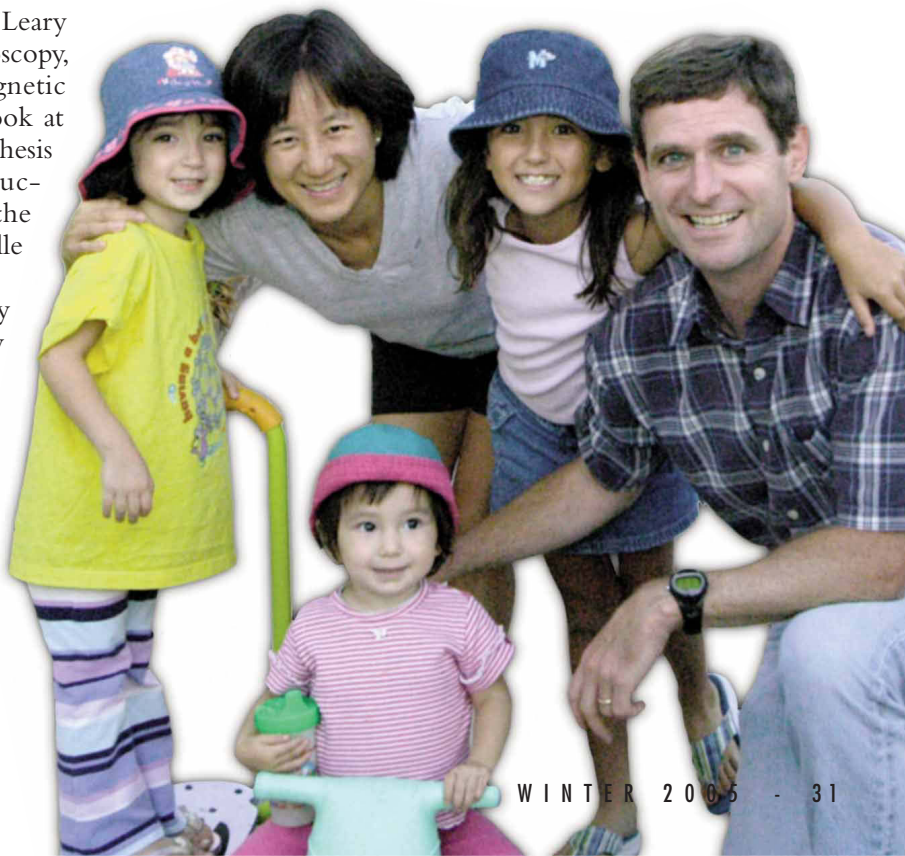
In spring 2001, O'Leary taught a graduate course at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and found that students who had attended smaller colleges were more likely to visit him during office hours.

At home, O'Leary said, he enjoys being active with his family. He met his wife, June, at UCLA, where she earned an M.S. in biochemistry and a Ph.D. in public health. She works as a consultant for the Rand Corp. They have three daughters, 8, 3 and 2. O'Leary was an assistant coach for his 8-year-old's soccer team.

He joined Linfield's Board of Trustees in 2004 and continues to follow Linfield sports. He watched the 2004 football national championship game on television with a Pomona friend who had competed against him for Lewis and Clark's track team during O'Leary's Linfield years.

And medical school? No regrets. O'Leary figures he has touched more lives by teaching than he would have as a physician. He said he has helped many students advance to medical school, "so I'm doing my part for the health industry."

— Beth Rogers Thompson



Dan O'Leary '86 with his family, from left, Frances, June, Katie (front) and Maggie.