

Engineering Professor to Retire After 35 Years of Service

By Scott FLEMMING

Don J. Gillis will be retiring after this academic year. He has been teaching since he accepted a position at Prince of Wales College in 1968 and has taught most of the engineers that now practice on PEI.

Don was born in Summerside, PEI and completed grade one in a convent before moving on to "high school" which was grades two to twelve. He had only one story to tell which took place during his elementary schooling. "I must have talked a lot as a kid," he said as he reminisced about the time a nun placed a mop beside his desk and threatened to shove it down his throat. "All I remember is wondering which end was going to go first."

Although a professor of Science, Don Gillis possesses philosophical wisdom. "No matter where you go you are going to find some people you don't like. There is only about 20 different personalities in the whole world."

Gillis graduated from St. Dunstan's University and then from TUNS (now called Dal Tech) in 1963 with his Bachelor of Engineering. Gillis went on to

receive his Master's from TUNS in one year. "I didn't sleep that much," he said, explaining how he completed the degree so quickly.

Free from debt after receiving one of the largest graduate scholarships offered at the time to study at TUNS, Don thought about getting his PhD in either California or Montreal. As he explained his patriotic decision to stay in Canada, he mused that he dodged the Watts riots only to be in Montreal for the FLQ bombings. But, after a year into his doctorate at McGill, Gillis decided that it was time to start working. "I just wanted to work, to see if the stuff I learned was any good."

When visiting his family in the summer of 1967 Gillis happened to be on the Prince of Wales campus. When he ran into the registrar Frank McKinnon, he made an "off the cuff" comment as to why they did not have an engineering department. As it was not really intended to be as serious comment, Gillis forgot about the whole situation. In a few months he was surprised to hear from McKinnon and was told that the college was interested in his "proposition" to start an engineering department at the facility.

Taking a few months to finish his current projects at an engineering firm in Montreal, Don returned to PEI and signed

with Prince of Wales in 1968. The buzz that the amalgamation of the St. Dunstan's and Prince of Wales would cause loss of jobs worried Don slightly, but he knew that he could return to practising engineering fairly easily. Evidently, that was not the case.

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Said amalgamation took place in 1969 and Don joined the two engineering professors at St. Dunstan's. At that time, the Diploma of Engineering could be done in either two or three years. Some have disagreed with the present three year program at UPEI, but even when there was a choice, seldom did a student choose the accelerated program.

It may seem that the professors have some "ulterior motives" for making the program longer, but it is not really of any benefit to them. They would still have to teach the same courses every year; their workload not decreasing. The concern of the professors is for their students, as Don puts it, "It's more than a job."

The professors' decision seems to

be a valid one. UPEI graduates (normally relatively few compared to other schools) have usually been at the top end of their class when they receive their full degree. The professors as a collective came to the conclusion that the extra year gives students time to mature both in the traditional and academic sense.

Although a professor of Science, Don Gillis possesses philosophical wisdom. "No matter where you go you are going to find some people you don't like. There is only about 20 different personalities in the whole world." His idea is that people should not place their ability to take pleasure in their life in the hands of others. Running away from an unpleasant person or situation will invariably lead to the experiencing of an equally unpleasant person or situation.

He is a man full of advice: "More things are decided by chance than by anything." He explained if you work hard, then the things that should happen to you will happen. Random events have such a great effect on your life; do not always try to make things happen, rather, just let them happen.

And so, the end of a legacy draws near. But all the Dons of the Engineering Department are not gone, for there is one left to carry the torch...(and a Wayne).

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