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Beck Adds Distinguished Faculty Award to Well-Rounded Resume

May-02-2007

When Roger Beck calls receiving Eastern Illinois University's Distinguished Faculty Award one of the highlights of his life, that's really saying something.

Beck, a professor of African and world history at EIU, is recognized locally, nationally and globally for his exemplary research, teaching and service. What few realize is that he has also excelled in other life experiences.

"I spent 10 years after college traveling and teaching at international schools in Paris, Tokyo and London," the 60-year-old Beck said. "Along the way, I had a lot of amazing experiences. I think it makes my teaching more interesting. I have had quite a checkered career."

His eclectic biography includes performing in an amateur opera in London; living on a kibbutz in Israel; playing on a French national basketball team; selling encyclopedias on a German military base; modeling in Paris, Tokyo and London; coaching a French women's softball team in an Italian tournament; and hanging out with Led Zeppelin lead singer Robert Plant while serving as an extra in the band's 1976 film "The Song Remains the Same."

More recent extracurricular activity includes making candy at Flesor's Candy Kitchen in Tuscola, owned and operated by his wife and her sister – both EIU alumni and former EIU faculty members. The shop is to be featured on the CBS Evening News this Friday.

"As I tell my students, if you sit on the couch in Charleston, nothing really exciting is going to happen unless a plane crashes on your house, but if you get out there, you never know," Beck said.

One experience Beck didn't anticipate was receiving the EIU Distinguished Faculty Award, which he will receive during commencement on Saturday, May 5.

"I was really speechless," he said, recalling his reaction to learning about the honor. "I really didn't expect it. Your peers are the ones who really understand what is required to teach a class, publish an article, serve on a campus committee, so for them to select me for this honor is quite humbling.

"I don't think enough people realize what a great faculty we have here at Eastern, so to be chosen for this award is very special. I'm really grateful to my colleagues both in my department and across campus."

It is a well-deserved honor, according to Anita Shelton, chair of the history department, who said Beck is a "masterful teacher" who earns consistent high marks from his students.

"No matter how busy he is with other activities, his students come first," Shelton wrote in her nomination letter. "However, his great talents and experience have been put to use extensively outside of his own classroom as well, both on campus and beyond."

One of Beck's earliest influences was his father, an educator who taught a variety of subjects at the local high school near Beck's tiny rural Indiana hometown of Belleville. The elder Beck, who was 52 when Roger was born, intrigued his son with his vast knowledge, including stories of his service in France in World War I.

Beck, a graduate of the University of Evansville, was earning a master's degree in social studies education at Indiana University when he first considered specializing in African history, an area he hadn't studied before.

"It seemed at the time that there were a lot of people doing American and European history," Beck said, explaining that researching African history seemed "exotic enough" to be a good niche.

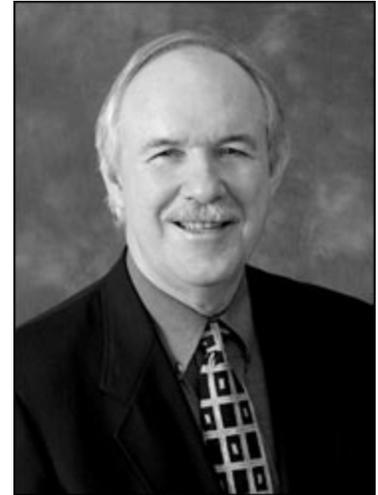
Beck's experiences teaching in international schools, and at the University of Cape Town while working on his doctoral dissertation, prepared him for working with student teachers at EIU after his arrival on campus in 1987.

During his 20 years at EIU, Beck has served on many campus committees, including Faculty Senate and the Council on Teacher Education, and most recently, the Presidential Search Advisory Committee. Beck was also acting associate dean of the Graduate School and International Programs for two years.

Beck is active in several scholarly international organizations, including the World History Association, for which he served as treasurer for six years. He is the recipient of two Fulbright scholarships, and has presented his research at professional meetings around the world.

An award-winning historian whose expertise is highly sought-after internationally, Beck is perhaps best known as an author of two major world history textbooks used widely throughout the country and for his text "The History of South Africa."

Starting this fall, Beck will take a sabbatical to update his courses and to work on two major writing projects.



Roger Beck

One is a four-volume collection of world history documents; the other is an extensive two-volume history of Africa for Houghton-Mifflin for classroom and general use.

“I really enjoy researching and writing. I also need to keep up with all the younger people in my department,” said Beck, the senior member of the history faculty. “I’ve had the good fortune to experience a lot of the world; now I can write about it as well.”