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From Microscopes to Moliere: Radavich Receives EIU's 2009 Distinguished Faculty Award

May-06-2009

As a student at the University of Kansas, a young David Radavich contently sought his undergraduate degree among microscopes, petri dishes, dissecting kits and chemicals.

"I loved chemistry and biology," he said, recalling the journey toward his bachelor's degree in psychology. And science seemed like such a natural fit for the son of a nuclear mathematician (his mother) and a metallurgical engineer (his father).

But when Radavich began attending Simon Fraser University in Vancouver to seek a master's degree, he found himself sitting in the university library and reading the plays of Moliere. And he began asking himself, "What's wrong here?"

He retraced his steps back to the University of Kansas, where, in 1974, he received a master's degree in English. And five years later -- which included a year of graduate work in Aberdeen, Scotland -- he received a doctorate in English and theatre. He hasn't looked back since.

"I love teaching and I love working with young people," he said.

And he's good at what he does, according to the many colleagues who nominated Radavich for Eastern Illinois University's 2008-2009 Distinguished Faculty Award. (He will be officially recognized for the EIU Faculty Senate-sponsored honor during the noon commencement ceremony on Saturday, May 9.)

As a fellow professor and academic adviser in the English department, John Kilgore has "often heard students praise (Radavich) as exceptionally well-organized, fair, tough, inspiring and funny.

"Particularly noteworthy is that, as a teacher of drama and playwriting, he has often involved students in plays and public readings that take the educational experience well beyond the boundaries of the classroom, often, I believe, shaping them in ways that are truly life-changing," Kilgore wrote.

Even as a child, Radavich wrote skits -- according to his mother, that is. He doesn't recall doing it. He does, however, remember writing and helping to perform skits in high school and, as a senior in college, extending his repertoire to include poetry.

"I like them equally," he said. "Poetry is more of a private art -- writing and reading. Theatre, on the other hand, is very social."

He has proven himself at both -- six books, five of which are collections of poetry and one a two-act play; 25 scholarly essays; more than 200 poems published in literary magazines in the U.S. and Europe; and 18 plays produced in venues including Charleston, St. Louis and New York.

Radavich cherishes his successes and uses them to fuel his current and future work. "It's important to me that my writings have a social benefit," he said.

In addition to bringing his work and expertise to the traditional university classroom, Radavich also teaches workshops. And he has collaborated with the Charleston Alley Theatre as a playwright, director and actor.

"I'm not a great actor, but I enjoy it," he said. "And I think it makes me a better writer."

Colleague Christopher Wixson, associate professor of English, wrote that "teaching and writing about drama necessitate a certain amount of experience in the theater, and part of what those of us who teach it try to instill in our students is precisely the idea that scholarly analysis of drama, seeing drama and doing theater are all interconnected intellectual and spiritual activities.

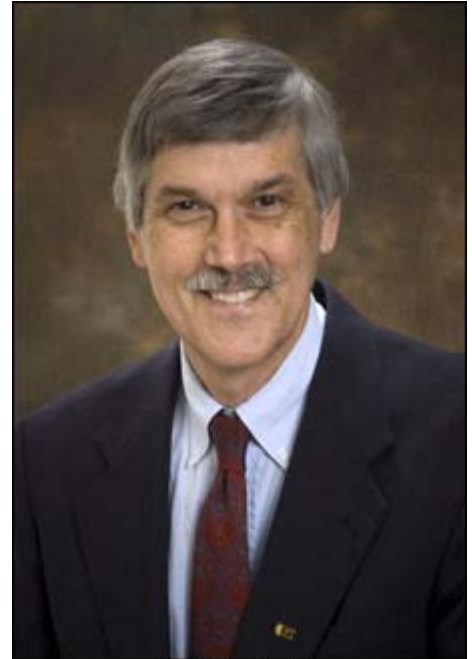
"David's model is powerful for both students and junior colleagues," Wixson wrote.

Radavich's impact on Eastern would not be complete without mention of his involvement with the University Professionals of Illinois (UPI), the bargaining unit for faculty and academic support professionals. Since becoming involved nearly 20 years ago, Radavich has served as both vice president and president of the local chapter, and currently serves as a trustee of the state organization.

"It's been a tremendous learning experience," he said, noting that his term on the board comes to an end in August. Five months later, the veteran teacher will retire from EIU. After 25 years, he said, he and his family are ready for a new phase in their lives.

His wife, Anne Zahlan, who retired from EIU's English Department in 2008, has already moved to Charlotte, N.C., where she's busy reacquainting herself with family and helping the couple's only daughter care for twin baby girls. Radavich will rejoin the group permanently after he retires -- not from his work, but from Eastern -- at the end of December.

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David Radavich

"I'll miss Eastern Illinois University. It's a great place to be and it's gotten better over the years. It's been marvelous to watch the positive changes that have taken place.

"But I can't imagine not doing what I've been doing. I'm sure there will be arts, readings and social service that I can continue to get involved with," he said.