

Retiree profile: Gene Drecktrah

by Sheryl Hanson - Tuesday, September 09, 2008

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/1221/retiree-profile-gene-drecktrah/>

It is easy to spot Gene Drecktrah's van on the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh campus; the words "Bug Van" on his license plates give him away.

As the campus bug expert, Drecktrah is used to fielding all sorts of questions about insects. Show him a bug — living or dead — and he is likely to rattle off its name immediately.

If he doesn't know, he will ask for a specimen, examine it under a microscope and reveal the creature's identity.

The retired biology and entomology professor taught his last class at UW Oshkosh in fall 2007. But he still visits campus nearly daily, carefully tending the University's considerable insect collection of more than 50,000 specimens — the great majority of which he and his students collected.

Today, there is barely a space in the lab that doesn't have a cabinet full of identified creepy, crawly creatures.

"When I arrived in 1966, there were a couple of cabinets of specimens; we now have 16 cabinets plus many specimens stored in alcohol," he said. "Because of students donating their collections that they did for class, the University's collection is quite substantial now."

Drecktrah also spent nine years (1985-1994) as associate dean in the College of Letters and Science and served as co-chair of the biology/microbiology department from 1997 until his retirement in 2002.

Now that he is retired, Drecktrah enjoys not having a schedule. He comes to the lab when he feels like it, leaves when he wants and takes extended vacations without asking anyone's permission.

Sadly, Drecktrah's wife, Mary, passed away two years ago. An assistant professor in the special education department, she also was well known and respected on campus.

These days, Drecktrah enjoys volunteering his time doing science outreach in area schools. He brings in various specimens to teach elementary students about them.

"They really enjoy the cockroach races," he said.

Drecktrah also serves on the UW Oshkosh Foundation Board of Directors, and has begun an endowment to support a student curator for the department's collection. He began the fund with a personal donation and challenged his past entomology students to make a contribution to the fund, to which he would match dollar for dollar any donation up to \$10,000.

To date, past students and others have contributed more than \$5,000 to the fund.

“The specimens students donated to the collection are part of their legacy to the University, and the endowment will provide assistance in curating the collection in the future,” he said.

He also started a scholarship in his wife’s name for students majoring in special education. Scholarships to the first recipients of both endowments were awarded this past spring.

For more information on UW Oshkosh scholarships and other giving opportunities, visit www.uwosh.edu/foundation/.