

Reflections of Otto J. Loewer

What an honor it is to be recognized by one's alma mater! And, I thank all of you, present and past, who have made this a wonderful and memorable day for my family and me.

I grew up the son of a rice farmer in the Fair Oaks community, some 60 miles east of Memphis, TN in the Arkansas Delta. However, my father's family lived in his boyhood home in south Louisiana, mostly in Acadia Parish, and we visited them at least once a year. But in this particular year he made a side trip to Baton Rouge to visit his Louisiana College roommate of the 1930's who happened to have majored in physics like my father. I still remember the conversation where this person, then a Gulf States Utilities employee, talked with great pride about the quality of LSU engineering graduates in general and agricultural engineering graduates in particular. This visit not only resulted in my deciding on the university I wished to attend, but I had clearly decided on a major as well!

My first day on campus in the fall of 1964 left a different type of memory. Late in the afternoon, my father unloaded my belongings into my dorm room in Hodges Hall, wished me luck, said his farewell, and then headed to Acadia Parish to visit family. I felt truly

alone. The next morning I headed to Atkinson Hall (then the engineering administrative building) where I met the Associate Dean of Engineering. Surely, I thought, this was the most powerful man on the LSU campus, and indeed for me he was. He graciously welcomed me into his office, took care of any paper work still required of me as a sophomore transfer student, and pointed me in the direction of the Agricultural Engineering Department which was to be my campus home for the next six years.

The 1960's were an especially turbulent time in the history of the United States. Political assassinations, the Vietnam War, the draft, drugs, and the civil rights movement ushered in vast changes across a wide spectrum of societal values. University campuses nationwide were caught up in the chaos, and students themselves were often at the forefront of such activity. Against this 1964 backdrop of social unrest, growing numbers of students, and emerging technological advancement in the use of computers, LSU still embraced much of its cultural history as having been a military school less than two decades earlier. It remained, from my perspective, a "no nonsense" school in its academic philosophy, but fair in its approach. The rules,

written and unwritten, were simple as I understood them: Anyone who finishes high school is welcome as an LSU student, at least for one semester. Do the course work at acceptable levels and remain an LSU student. Complete the course requirements at acceptable levels and become an LSU graduate. Understand that a "C" grade is truly considered average so don't expect to see a lot of A's or even B's. Recognize that hardly anyone finishes engineering in four years so expect to take five years to receive a degree. Personal discipline regarding academic performance is expected and is the student's responsibility. Transfer to another major or another university or depart for home as you wish. ROTC is required. Student opinions, especially with regard to controversial topics, are to be confined to the Free Speech Alley next to the Student Union.

High grades were the exception and repeating one or more of the above courses was not unusual and even expected. Once an engineering student somehow got by calculus and physics (no sure thing by any means), there was the expectation of one or more failures when running the gamut of engineering mechanics courses – statics, dynamics, and strength of materials – followed by basic courses in thermodynamics, electrical engineering and hydraulics. At the end of the day, becoming a graduate from the LSU College of Engineering meant that you had been challenged by the toughest of academic conditions and had been found worthy. Nothing was freely given, academic casualties were plentiful, and the word "entitlement" was not in the proverbial LSU dictionary.

My wife Betty and I married in 1966 during the first of my two senior years. She worked as a secretary in the Agronomy Department and was housed in the John M. Parker Agricultural Coliseum. This offered me many advantages. First, her staff parking sticker made us somewhat immune from the daily plague of parking tickets experienced by most students. Secondly, and most important, was the arrival of Pete

Maravich, and the fact that basketball games were then played in the building where she worked. Words cannot describe the impact that Pistol Pete had on the LSU and national sports scene in general and LSU basketball in particular. With Betty's office strategically located where the basketball games were then played, I could easily park close and enter the facility to go to where she worked. We could enter the arena directly across from the hall from her office. Thus, we were often able to watch practice and be the first to be seated on game day, often to the puzzlement of others as to how we had become people of such privilege. I've told many, only partially in jest, that the primary reason I went to graduate school was to see Pete Maravich play basketball.

I must share one Pete Maravich story that I've not seen written elsewhere. Pete was an excellent foul shot shooter. Once, when he came to the line with two shots his first one unexpectedly missed to the sound of a slight groan in the audience. No one – not a teammate, visiting team member or any person in attendance expected him to miss two in a row. It was simply beyond comprehension, a physical impossibility. Yet, his second shot circled the rim and then fell to the floor untouched by the nine other players caught off-guard by such a rare moment. Suddenly, in the total silence of that fraction of a second between the bounce of the ball and its retrieval, a fan yelled in disbelief as he assigned blame for this shocking event, "Damn you referee!"

In retrospect, I look back at my time at LSU over forty years ago with great fondness. As a career academician and administrator in higher education, I've seen universities change in philosophy and focus with mixed results. Yet, LSU in the 1960's provided a structured, simple, fair, demanding, effective, and well understood sense of what was required to survive and prosper as an LSU student. This instilled a level of personal discipline, commitment and focus that I believe served my classmates and me well. The great way in which I was

treated and educated by the Agricultural Engineering faculty gave me the foundation required for whatever success that I've experienced thereafter. I must add that the Agronomy faculty fully embraced Betty as a colleague and me as her husband, later giving her a silver tray to commemorate her time with them. Of course, there were the many friends, colleagues and faculty who so enriched my time at LSU, and I will mention but two now passed away, Mansel M. Mayeux who was my major professor in Agricultural Engineering, and W. H. Willis, head of the Agronomy Department who hired Betty on the spot after I introduced her as my fiancée.

I'll close with a simple story that forever influenced my vision of what effective academic leadership is all about. Close to graduation, Betty and I were at a student engineering function of some type. We got into our car preparing to leave and were having some difficulty exiting the parking place because of reduced visibility. The same

associate dean of engineering that had welcomed me as a transfer student years before came over and helped us move safely into traffic. I was taken back that a person in his position, in my view still the most powerful man at LSU, would bother to help a student that he hardly knew. There in an instant, I was taught the power and example of servant leadership.

University faculty, staff and administrators should never forget that they are indeed role models for generations of students who pass their way. It is the relationship between teacher and student that will survive long after research funding, private donations and athletic achievements are forgotten. These students will for the most part be appreciative. It just may be decades before they get around to saying so. Accordingly, I want to say "thank you" to the LSU faculty of both yesterday and today for what they have done for generations of students, me included.