

Engineering a Better World

A journey from the field to the classroom

Tuesday, September 3, 2019

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Editor's Note: This is one installment in a series featuring UNH faculty telling their stories in their own words.

Ray Cook, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering

" When I was in fourth grade back in the '60s, Ms. Felizen would invite students up to the front of the classroom from time to time to dance or sing or act. I used to make everybody laugh by pretending to be a crazy professor. And, well, here I am.

I went to the University of Illinois for my undergraduate degree. When I arrived, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Eventually, a senior mentor suggested pursuing engineering for a good job and Spanish because I loved the language and the arts. She was one of the many people who helped shape my journey.

I became a resident advisor (RA), which was a great experience, and the head advisor of the dorm was a great guy, as was my band director and one of my engineering professors, so I had this overlapping group of friends and mentors. I also had the opportunity to study in Spain; first for a year with the Spanish program and a second time as an engineering intern. I loved my time abroad. It's why I strongly advocate for opportunities to study internationally for our engineering students. Studying abroad and studying the arts changed my life.

After graduating from the University of Illinois, I worked as an engineer in several places in the South — Birmingham, Alabama; Pensacola, Florida, and Athens, Georgia — and in a nuclear power plant in Oyster Creek, New Jersey. I loved being an engineer. Civil engineering really is about bringing different people together around the table to solve problems. And I loved being out in the field, working with the construction workers. Not all of them had much of a formal education, but it didn't matter—they were so smart it was humbling. A few took me under their wings, and I learned so much from them.

Over time, though, I realized I wasn't satisfied with just applying the code; I wanted to understand what went into it. I decided to apply to graduate school. I attended Cornell and met my wife, Marcia, there. After I received my Ph.D., I came to UNH in 1992. I had attended a state university for my undergraduate degree and liked the fact that UNH is also a state university. All these years later, I still love UNH's commitment to undergraduate education in such a broad range of subjects. It's always been one of the university's great strengths.

I think it's important for people to see university professors involved in their towns and cities, too. Off campus, I serve on the planning board in my community. Marcia and I have one daughter and one son; she graduated from college this spring, and he begins his sophomore year this fall. And we have a new member of the family, our golden retriever puppy Tucker. Tucker's father is a therapy dog here on campus, and we decided to start training Tucker to follow that same path. Already, even though he's still a puppy, he's been helping people he meets on our training walks. He's a very good boy.

I'm also a member of the Order of the Engineer and helped bring a chapter to UNH. In the induction ceremony, students are reminded of the quiet responsibility engineers hold to protect the public and the environment, and they are urged to get involved in their communities.

Members of the order wear an iron ring on the pinky finger of their working hands. It clicks on the table surface when performing calculations, and that sound reminds us of our responsibility to the people we serve. In our introduction to civil engineering classes, ethics is a focus, and this little ring is a symbol of our duty to the people who depend on our work. I want students to see it and talk about that.

Ultimately, it is my great privilege to do my best to show students the beauty of the subjects I teach. Engineering is fascinating, and it's a vehicle through which you really can make the world a better place. So that's why I'm here — I think it's how I can do the most good — by working hard for the students and, thereby, contribute most to UNH, which has become a true home."

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University of New Hampshire

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The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).

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