Bill Malevich retires after 26 years as Dean of Students

BY JIM WINTERER

SOMETHING’S MISSING...AND MISSED...at the University of St. Thomas this year. Dean of Students William Malevich in December ended his long career at the university. His retirement brings to an end his popular “Ask the Dean” column, an amazing array of 2,333 questions asked and answered in St. Thomas’ weekly Bulletin over the past decade.

The origin of the column can be traced — if you stretch it a bit — to a campus “Gong Show” sponsored by a St. Thomas’ fraternity in the early 1980s. Malevich was asked to perform as “Dean, Dean the Dancing Machine.”

“We were really growing in size about that time, and I was afraid I was losing touch with the students,” Malevich recalled. “I was looking for ways to reach out and let students know that someone was willing to hear and help them. So I started the booth in Murray Hall and called it ‘Dean, Dean the Answer Machine.’”

The “Ask the Dean” column was developed in the fall of 1983 as a written version of the answer booth. It was intended to be a mostly serious forum for students to freely voice concerns. But as readers of the column know, “Ask the Dean” opened the door to creativity, humor and just about every emotion experienced by college students. If the column served one purpose, it let everyone know what was on students’ minds.

Sometimes, not a whole lot.

There was the question, for instance, about the cubic volume of atoms required to cover the surface of the average-sized chicken. The dean claimed his calculator blew up trying to figure it out. Two students, who called themselves the Duo of Deranged Dowling Dames, wanted to know the number of snowflakes in a pile out by the ball field. The dean told them 42,821,446,348. Still another said his life would be complete if he knew how many bulbs decorate campus trees at Christmas.

The answer: 6,000, except for the 500 that “disappeared.”

Then there were the “bodily functions” questions. Leading this category were the many inquiries or comments on toilet paper or campus restrooms. There were complaints, for instance, that the “ACME toilet paper holders are too large for the roll” or that “maybe our (tuition) money should go to something that we want — say rollable toilet paper dispensers.”

“DEAR DEAN OF DEANS, WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE?”

ONE STUDENT WANTED TO KNOW WHY MEN don’t shave their armpits, while another wondered if fingernails grow faster in the winter. According to the dean, fingernails grow faster in the summer, and he replied: “If both women and men shaved their underarms, how would we be able to tell the difference?”

Topics that prompted the most letters, at least in the past five years or so, dealt with tuition and financial aid, getting dates, drinking, and freedom to discuss controversial topics. Probably the two most popular topics were parking and food.

Other letters dealt with off-campus housing problems, cheating, AIDS, flunking out, racism, campus crime, loud people in the library, recycling, pro-life and pro-choice issues, drinking and alcoholism, hazing, smoking, sexual orientation, and sexual harassment.

Some students sought and received help with simple problems, like showers that were too hot or too cold, installing some needed coat racks, finding out about passages written on the chapel walls, or fixing potholes. One student asked for help because she was afraid to speak in class, another wrote because he or she was worried about having skin cancer.

How’d you like to answer this one: “Dear Dean of Deans, What is the meaning of life?”

The dean replied: “If I really gave you the answer to that question, wouldn’t it take the fun out of discovering the answer for yourself?”

But your heart would ache for some letter writers. “I am having a difficult time making my tuition payments on time,” wrote “Broke and Exhausted.” “I still owe around $2,000 and pretty soon I’ll have the down payment for next semester to worry about. I have a very good-paying job, and work around 30 hours a week, yet lately all I have been doing is working and worrying about how I am going to come up with all of this money! I have managed the last two years, but lately it’s just too much of a strain.”

Another student, identified as “Caught in the Middle,” wrote: “I do not know how my family will be able to afford it next year. I am sure we will find a way, but it will be at the expense of the rest of my family. When is this going to end, when is St. Thomas going to realize that not everyone is either wealthy or poor.”

‘Dear Departing Dean-O: Thanks for keeping in touch...’
Sometimes students wrote simply to say how much they enjoyed St. Thomas. A grad wrote to the dean: “Over the years I have read your column with joy, humor and happiness. I have watched you tackle the unthought-provoking questions students give you, like who will win the Super Bowl, how many Johnnies does it take to screw in a light bulb and always popular, ‘Dean can you help me find a date for the dance?’ … But with all the joking and funny letters you deal with, you handle the important letters with understanding and compassion. When students write to you about how and where to get help, who to talk to about getting something fixed, or how to voice their opinion about ‘touchy’ subjects you answer them in a serious and helpful way.”

Malevich replied, “It’s always nice to see that when I pay people to write nice letters, they actually do so.”

“Ask the Dean” has probably come closest to “Dear Abby” when the dean got letters on how to find dates. He got plenty. Like this one from J. Tommie Senior (a former student who wins the dean’s vote for the best letter-writer to walk this campus): “If a car full of Katies left St. Kate’s at 3 p.m. heading north on Cleveland at 35 m.p.h., and a car full of male Tommies left at the same time, if I was one of the Tommies, could I get a date for Homecoming if we crashed into each other somewhere around St. Clair Avenue?”

The dean gave J. Tommie some tips, including one about standing out on Cleveland Avenue with a sign. “Carloads and truckloads of Katies would drive by, read the sign, laugh hysterically, and keep going.”

We don’t know if J. Tommie Senior ever got a date. We can tell you he inspired a lot of other letter writers who signed off as J. Tommie Junior, J. Tommie Transfer Student, J. Tommie Hulker, and Ms. Tommie Senior.

The real J. Tommie, since graduated, wrote one last letter to the dean in the Nov. 29 Bulletin: “And if you run into me on the street, please call me ‘J. Tommie Senior.’ Because I’ll call you ‘Dean,’ which is how you’ll be remembered by the thousands of students you’ve touched during your stint at St. Thomas. Dean, I’m glad I left St. Thomas before you did, for UST without you would have been … like … like something unimaginable,” he wrote.

Malevich says it happens all the time that a current or former student will come up and say, “Hi, I’m Manhole Covers on Cleveland,” or “Hello Dean, I’m Clock Hands.”

It would no doubt be more pleasant to meet Clock Hands or Manhole Covers than the authors who signed off as An Incensed Caf Eater, Thoroughly Disgusted, Raging Catholic, Sick of Mahogany Row B.S., A Pain in the Butt, Disgruntled Customer, Crow Crop Complainer, Perturbed Permit Holder, I’ve Spent Enough Already, or I. M. Frustrated.

You could tell that other writers were mostly having fun: Miss Goodyear, The Parking Ticket Queen, A. Doubting Thomasite, Glued to My Feet, High and Dry in Ireland, Study Bug Turned Beer Guzzler, The Penguin in Iraq, The Boys in Grill Block A, and Eligible Spring Flingers.

Malevich, 60, retired on Dec. 31, although his last day was actually Dec. 29 because, he says, “I had to turn the keys over to someone, and no one would be here on the 31st.”

A native of Eveleth, Malevich graduated from St. Thomas in 1955 with a bachelor’s degree in political science. He wanted to attend law school but his grades weren’t good enough and his draft board told him he’d be drafted unless he was a farmer or a teacher. So he took a teaching job in Arlington, Minn., and two years later was drafted. After two less-than-pleasant years in the Army (he used the word “horrible”), he returned to Arlington as a teacher and counselor and later returned to St. Thomas for his master’s in guidance and counseling.

He first came to work at St. Thomas in 1965 and worked in both admissions and student counseling. The next year he was appointed director of student counseling, and the year after that he became the first layman ever to hold the dean of students position. “I thought the next year I’d become president,” he quipped.

In a news release announcing the new dean of students, then-rector Monsignor Terrence Murphy predicted in 1967 that “Mr. Malevich because of his experience in teaching and counseling young people will bring a wealth of practical experience to the job and will relate well to the St. Thomas students.”

Twenty-six and a half years later, Malevich says he’s never been able to adequately articulate what the dean of students does. “The position is often defined around student discipline, and that’s the hardest part of the job,” he said. But Malevich also oversaw such areas...
MALEVICH RETIREMENT PARTY
SET FOR MARCH 19

A retirement party for Dean of Student William Malevich will be held Saturday, March 19, in the Murray-Herrick Campus Center.

Invitations will be sent to alumni in the Twin Cities, faculty and staff. If you don't receive an invitation but want to come, you are most welcome.

The party will begin with a 5:30 p.m. reception in the Fireside Room; the dinner and program will start at 6:30 p.m. in the student dining room. Master of ceremonies will be the Rev. John Malone. Cost of the evening will be $20 per person.

Donations are being accepted for the William Malevich Scholarship Fund.

Also being accepted are any written anecdotes about Malevich. The stories will be collected in a book, and could provide ammunition for the master of ceremonies.

If you want to send an anecdote, make a donation to the scholarship fund (checks payable to the University of St. Thomas), make a reservation if you didn't get an invitation, or ask a question, the person to contact is Mary Mattocks in the Vice President for Student Affairs Office. Her address is: Mary Mattocks, Mail #4045, University of St. Thomas, 2115 Summit Ave., St. Paul, MN 55105. Her number is (612) 962-6120.

as Health Service, Residence Life, Campus Activities, Tutor-Mentor Program, and Facilities Coordinator, as well as programs for international and minority students.

“There’s a part of my job that I’ve never learned to enjoy,” Malevich said. “I’ve always felt some responsibility for students’ behavior. I’ve felt that when students do bad things, that somehow I had failed.”

There’s a good example of that in a fall 1990 “Ask the Dean.” When two students complained that a number of posters they had placed around campus were stolen, Malevich replied: “I often find myself apologizing to someone for student behavior and so, I apologize to you if indeed it was students who took your posters.”

Among the changes he’s seen over the past quarter century are the type of rules that govern student life. “We used to have rules about when lights had to be turned off, the length of hair and signing out on weekends. We tried to put all the students in a lock step. Back in 1967 we had nearly 300 students on probation, most of them for very minor offenses,” he said. “We’ve changed some of those rules for the better.”

In a fall 1989 “Ask the Dean” column, Malevich put it this way: “The college is concerned about the behavior of students outside of the classroom. At the same time this college no longer adopts the position of ‘in loco parentis’ which was the philosophy prevalent until the 1960s wherein the colleges could totally control students’ lives. ... The college tries to take a balanced position between these two extremes.”

The other big change he’s noticed over the years is that student behavior is becoming more violent and more frightening. “I think this generation is more violent, particularly man-on-woman violence. There are a lot of domestic problems here that few people know about,” he said.

What’s it take to be a dean of students? In a column several years ago he said there are several prerequisites — “you have to be bright, personable, a great problem solver and come from the Iron Range. Well, at least I have one of those.”

The top requirement for his job, he said more recently, is a sense of humor. “Somehow you have got to learn to keep smiling, even when things look the worst.”

There will always be the tough ones to deal with, he says, but the vast majority of St. Thomas students “are really, really great people. They are positive, friendly, and have depth to their convictions. In most ways they are more adult than college students used to be.”

For the past five winters, Malevich and his wife, Penny, have spent six weeks in their beachfront condominium in Manzanillo, Mexico. They are now planning to spend more time there, and hope to travel more. Penny plans to stay busy, also, with the Aardvark Treasures antique shop she opened about 10 years ago on Randolph Avenue.

“With NAFTA passing, I might open a Taco Bill’s,” he quipped. “Actually, our plans after we return from Mexico this year are up in the air.”

(One plan for sure will be to attend the retirement party that will be held in his honor March 19.)

Malevich hinted at his retirement plans in a response this fall to “Pablo the Puglist,” who wrote in to ask, “Why are you retiring? The way I look at it, you still have a couple more good years left in that body. I think you could at least stay for five years more. You stayed for J. Tommie Senior’s whole St. Thomas stay. What will we do without you, Mallie? ... Are you in some witness-relocation program? Are you fleeing the country for political reasons? Are you going down to play baseball in the Mexican league? Regardless, we will all miss you and, more importantly, we will miss your weekly column. Thank you for making me laugh.”

“I was offered a fantastic job as a diver off the Cliffs of Acapulco,” Malevich replied. “Stop by and see me sometime.”