

Inspirational PVCC Professor Bruce Robinson Retires

Preview the
 Student Art Exhibition
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Maxwell Walpole, assistant editor

Instantly recognizable by any PVCC student or faculty member for his distinctive neatly-trimmed, starting-to-gray beard, his warm smile and prominent position as the Phi Theta Kappa honor society faculty adviser, Bruce Robinson has been a valued member of the community ever since he began working at PVCC in 1979. Now, after 42 years of teaching, Robinson is preparing to retire on May 14.

When Robinson graduated college, he was not intending to pursue a career as an educator. Robinson served as the assistant manager of a department store before he changed to selling insurance in Charlottesville. “I saw an ad for Piedmont Virginia Community College for an accountant, and so I applied for that job in 1979 and was hired that September,” said Robinson.

Robinson worked at PVCC as an accountant for 12 years before he found an opportunity to

demonstrate his leadership skills. When PVCC updated their phone systems from rotary phones to the current models, he was in charge of training PVCC employees to use the new system. When it was time for Robinson to train the business division personnel, the college chairman was impressed with how easily Robinson connected to the employees he taught and how patient he was with them and asked Robinson if he wanted to become an adjunct professor. At first, Robinson was hesitant. “I thought, ‘Well, I’ve really never taught per se’ and he said, ‘Well, yes, you have and I’ve seen you do it . . . you really do have a knack for it,’ and so I said, ‘Sure. I’ll go ahead and teach a course in Lotus 123,’” said Robinson.

At first, Robinson was extremely nervous when teaching his first class. However, after seeing the student evaluations of his course at the end of the semester, he realized he did not have

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Bruce Robinson and David Lerman "twinning" at the PVCC Spring 2020 Convocation. Photo courtesy of Bruce Robinson

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to be as nervous. From there, Robinson went back to university and worked hard to earn a master's degree so he could teach full time. After graduating with his degree, he balanced teaching with his job as an army photojournalist until he retired from the military in 1998.

"So it was the military . . . that kind of influenced the way I did my teaching, because I would always tell my students, 'I'm not a control freak, but I'm always in charge,'" said Robinson.

Over the course of his teaching career, Robinson has learned as much from his students as they learn from him. "I didn't have the same people every semester, I had 150 different new students. And so that kind of drove me to learn from them as individuals as time passed, learn new cultures, understand the value and diversity of not only the different cultures, but also the different ages and what students experienced in the class because my classes were technology based," said Robinson.

"[I learned] that they had their own issues, that they had their own lives. And that I had to do what I could to meet them where they were. Regardless of how many times you repeat it, I think some students didn't learn it that way. So the job for me was to not let that frustrate me, and not let it frustrate the student, and give the student confidence that regardless of whatever it was they thought they did not understand that I would always be there to push them to be able to learn," said Robinson.

Outside of teaching, Robinson worked for many years as a faculty adviser for the Phi Theta Kappa honor society. As an adviser, Robinson helped students develop their leadership skills, answered questions related to PTK projects, and helped register PTK students for the regional conferences they attend. "He has been the heart and soul of Phi Theta Kappa at PVCC since, well, forever," said fellow PTK faculty adviser and Professor of Spanish Kit Decker. "[He] has given untold numbers of club officers a baptism of fire in student leadership and he has chosen them with insight, kindness, and an unerring knack for unleashing potential."

Robinson formed strong friendships within the PVCC community. He maintains a close friendship with Director of Student Success and Retention David Lerman. On memorable

occasions, Lerman and Robinson have even taken to wearing matching outfits.

"He is one of my very good friends and though I am very happy for him to reach this milestone, I will greatly miss having him as a colleague," said Lerman. "He was such a wonderful professor, such a fine leader for PTK, and such a good role model for students, staff, and faculty. He took immense pleasure in the lofty accomplishments of our college's most high-achieving students, quite a few of whom won awards as the top community college students in Virginia. But he also was one of the most gentle and encouraging guides a student could possibly have, truly meeting our students at their level and working with them to achieve mastery of skills that would provide not only career possibilities but also pride of accomplishment and a growth in their self-confidence. Furthermore, he took it upon himself to reach out to all PVCC's male students of color every semester and emphasize his pride in them and his availability if they wanted someone to talk to."

Aside from faculty, Robinson also approaches each male African-American and Hispanic student each semester and offers to mentor them. "To me, being a mentor to students who look like me because they get to a point where they have communicated that they never saw a whole bunch of African-American male teachers, even in high school. They may have seen a coach or two, but once they get to college, they don't see any African-American male instructors. And so I wanted to make sure that my face was out there for them to be able to count on me if they needed me. And so that, to me, is what I want my legacy to be," said Robinson.

"I've had several [mentees] come back to visit and just pour their hearts out to me that if I hadn't been there, that they wouldn't be where they are. I will say that it's a well-rounded group of people, not just African-American males or Hispanic males, but particularly [students] who have moved on to four-year schools and say later in life that they remembered me telling them that they could do what I do. That . . . my parents didn't finish high school . . . I was the first one [in my family] to go to college, I was the first one to graduate high school and certainly the first one who was going to be a college professor. And as I