

I first met Jim Bonnen when he was a graduate student in economics at Harvard University and I was a graduate student in economics at the University of Chicago. We always argued over where we first met — but we knew that we hit it off immediately through meetings of the American Agricultural Economics Association, conferences in Washington D.C. and my visits to the Michigan State campus before I became president.

During my years as president, Jim was an outstanding professional, a tremendous supporter, and a loyal friend. Jim and Sally became close lifelong friends with Dolores and me. Any president who has a faculty member like Jim Bonnen has been truly blessed. Such professors are the foundations of a great university. There are so many examples of his contribution and service that I scarcely know where to begin or what to include. Let me just mention three.

When I arrived in East Lansing, Jim was working on a study of the “Role of Universities in Public Affairs” sponsored by the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC). I began meeting with him to discuss my early thoughts about a new vision for Michigan State. He freely shared his work on the future of land grant universities and helped me forge three seminal speeches on MSU titled a “Pluralistic University.” On another occasion when Michigan State University faced difficult changes in academic governance, Jim was there as Chairman of the Academic Council Steering Committee (1972-1974). The challenge was met more smoothly and successfully because of his leadership. Then when the university faced the critical issue of whether the faculty should unionize, Jim Bonnen along with other faculty leaders launched an unusual non-partisan effort to educate their colleagues on the pros and cons of unionization and to achieve the maximum possible vote so that there would be a clear answer.¹ The unionization attempt failed – twice.² I was pleased to honor him with the MSU Distinguished Faculty Award in 1972.

I could go on with Jim’s many professional accomplishments as an economist both in academe and government. His extensive lifelong contributions in data analysis, organization and public policy are well documented and well known in his field. The success of his doctoral students, many here today, speaks volumes about his investment in human capital.

Not as well known are the cases where he and Sally were involved in the community. I will always remember their regular personal participation with the Christo Rey Church founded in 1961 to serve the Hispanic/Latino community in the Lansing area. Its original base were the early Mexican-American migrants, most from Jim’s home state of Texas. At Christo Rey, Jim worked with their Community Center to deliver health, educational and counseling services. Jim believed in the Biblical value that he was his brother and sister’s keeper. His brilliant economic analyses and publications may have been considered Ivory Tower, but he was also a down-to-earth realist who included personal action on actual problems.

As Sally knows, Jim and I would always talk at great length about international and domestic agriculture, rural poverty, human capital, politics, history and higher education. We were soul-mates who cared about issues and people.

Dolores, whose health prevented her from being here today, especially wanted to join me in expressing our deepest condolences to Sally, their children, and grandchildren over their loss.

Ed, Alice, Clarence, Charles and John – your father’s life made an incredible difference to all those whose lives he touched and countless more who will never know that he did.

Jim Bonnen was a great scholar and fine human being whom I deeply admired.

I have lost a kindred soul and treasured friend.

Remarks by Dr. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr. given at reception following memorial service at Kellogg Center, August 22, 2013.

1 Committee of Concerned Faculty, led by Professors Gerald Miller, Paul Varg, and Jim Bonnen.

2 Mike Wagoner, “MSU Faculty Votes,” Lansing State Journal, October 23, 1972. The second negative vote was in 1978.