

Leaving the “liberal bubble”

Iconoclastic history professor John Sharpless retires

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John Sharpless: “Labels have put people into their own bubbles, which is hard for those of us who are just a bundle of ideas.”

UW-Madison is a “liberal bubble,” according to long-time history professor John Sharpless.

“Openly disagreeing with people here is like pooping in the pool,” says Sharpless. “They turn around and give you this dagger look. I had Republican students in my classes who said they white-knuckled their way through discussions in other classes. They never felt they could say anything.”

For 43 years, Sharpless taught history to generations of UW students, some having experienced the first moon landing, Watergate and Ronald Reagan’s election. On March 26, UW’s Center for the Study of Liberal Democracy and the History Department will honor the recently retired professor, his teachings and his leadership, at a private party.

“We have much to learn from his multifaceted career,” Richard Avramenko, the center’s co-director, writes in an email.

Sharpless taught American history, specializing in statistical methods, comparative demography, and exploration. Political science was never part of his official syllabus, but since 1975, his classroom has been a space for safe political discussions between both left and right leaning students.

“I think it’s more about how I treated students generally,” says Sharpless, 73, who gave his final lecture on Dec. 11. “I treated them as adults whose opinions should be respected and I was always truly interested in what each person had to say. I still am.”

Whether the conversation revolved around history, politics, popular culture or even their personal plans for the future, Sharpless aimed from the beginning to establish an atmosphere of “comfortable conversation” in his classroom.

“There are some people who are so firmly grounded in what they believe that they don’t want to hear other opinions and John is the exact opposite,” says Erin Miller, an author and speech-language pathologist who was a student of Sharpless. “It’s almost like he would put things out there as a way to dare people to say something different. He wanted that conversation to happen and people felt safe debating with him and disagreeing with him.”

Miller adds, “I get a little emotional talking about John and his retirement. I think the UW lost something in him that they’re not likely to find again. His classroom was a special place on campus and I don’t think they’ll be able to replace it.”

While Sharpless considers himself a “constitutional libertarian,” he doesn’t promote political labels. Sharpless always ended his lectures with the same message: “Get outside your bubble,” referring to both students’ everyday environment and their political standpoint.

“These labels have put people into their own bubbles, which is hard for those of us who are really just a bundle of ideas,” says Sharpless. “We tend to talk to people we know agree with us to reinforce what we already believe. I tell my students to get out of their bubbles but I realize it’s extremely difficult because if you push too hard against the walls of that bubble, the people who are in there with you might turn against you.”

Miller, who identifies as a conservative, says she also experienced this sort of opposition on campus, especially while studying for her master’s degree during the 2016 presidential election.

“It was a tense and uncomfortable time for me,” says Miller. “I argued quite a bit with some of my professors who would state their opinions as facts. It’s hard, especially on UW’s campus, because people will voice their opinion assuming everyone in the room agrees with them. It’s intimidating to sit there with a different opinion and think, ‘Should I say anything?’”

“The climate on campus is hostile,” adds Avramenko, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science. “Disagreement now turns quickly to dehumanizing, ad hominem attacks. As far as I can tell, there’s either no Republicans on campus, or they are very cautious about expressing this.”

But David McDonald, professor of Russian history at UW, disagrees with Sharpless’ “liberal bubble” characterization of UW-Madison. “I find it unfortunate and simplistic, the sort of pat reductionism that obscures or glosses over a lot of more complex issues,” he says. “[Does] the whole

campus march in some sort of ideological lockstep? In my experience, that is far from the case.”

Nevertheless, Miller found that she could relax inside of Sharpless’ classroom. “We always had a great exchange of ideas in there,” Miller says. “In his Revelations class, global warming came up and there was a student who was very dedicated to fighting global warming. John had different views but nothing got volatile. It turned into a really great conversation. Part of that is the way he handles these classes but the other part is just John’s personality.”

That personality, Sharpless says, shifted dramatically when in 1998 he ran in the Republican primary for Wisconsin’s second district congressional seat. Two years later, he won the GOP nomination for the same seat, but lost to Tammy Baldwin in the general election by about 9,000 votes. Sharpless has travelled around the world, learning firsthand about the communities in Papua New Guinea and Argentina. But his political campaign in Wisconsin may have had a greater impact on him.

“Running for office changed me for the better,” says Sharpless. “As a stuffy old college professor, I could live with my blinders up and not pay any attention to the world. But I had to be nice to everyone when I ran for office, going up to people, shaking their hands and asking them how their day was. It stuck with me. It got me out of my own bubble and turned me into an outward-looking person.”

While some may see Sharpless’ retirement as the end of an era — leaving a hole on campus where there was once a haven — Sharpless believes otherwise.

“Our job in life is to discover prejudices and do our best to change them, or at the very least restrain them in moments when we have a chance to learn something new from someone else,” says Sharpless. “We have some very bright historians on staff and many excellent teachers in the department, each with their own unique style. They might not have the quirky demeanor of ‘a Sharpless’ but they offer other positive things that make their classrooms interesting and worthwhile.”

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