

1A Dr. Bill Graff (1938-2022)

As delighted as I am that this material has finally made it to book format, I'm also sad that Bill didn't get to see the completed version. Dr. Bill Graff went to be with His Savior on April 11, 2022.

In the fall of 1968 I was a struggling grad student at Drexel University in Philadelphia. Several other students told me, "You've got to meet this young EE professor. He went to Purdue. He teach tough classes like Fields and Waves –but he makes the classes fun. He really cares about the students- and he really loves Jesus."

And so I met Dr. R. William Graff ("No, no, call me Bill.") He fit the stereotype: glasses, tie, white socks, and pocket protector with colored pens. He had written some papers on isotropic ionized gases and was teaching Circuits and Fields courses. I found out that he was also doing a "rap session" (open discussion) on Thursday afternoons in the student center and had just been interviewed by the local media about the Jesus movement. Bill was doing Bible studies with some grad students, played tapes of Francis Schaeffer, and developed a course called "Christianity 100" for the Philadelphia Free University. His home was open for students and hippies to visit and to talk.

In 1972 he moved on to Wilkes College. We stayed in touch, mostly by Christmas letters. Then, in the spring of 1979, I got a phone call out of the blue. It was from Bill Graff: "Hi. I'm teaching at a small Christian college in Texas, and we could use some help." That was an understatement. At that point in time, Bill was the entire EE department, the only electrical faculty member. He was teaching all twelve courses in the curriculum. He was a Super-Prof, but it wasn't sustainable in the long term.

The timing was perfect. I was just completing a postdoc and beginning to seek a permanent position. I applied to LeTourneau College (now it's a University) at his encouragement and was hired. Bill promptly shared all his teaching tips and all his lecture notes with me. That jump-start was a life-saver, since a brand-new lecture can take over ten hours to prepare.

Bill was already famous on campus for his wild ties, his Circuits class, his class devotionals, his Lab 3 Rube Goldberg projects, and his open house. (Originally the ties were almost a protest. Faculty were expected to wear a tie on campus. "If they insist on strangling me," Bill once said, "I might as well have some fun in the process.")

Bill's Circuits class was the optimal way to impact students. It was a foundation course for EEs, a required course for every engineer, and Bill was the instructor. Every student who took it learned classical circuit analysis, problem-solving, perseverance, and heard a complete set of Bill's devo's. Circuits I happened to be (and probably still is) the toughest course on campus. Not everyone got it the first time. In spite of that, Bill received numerous teaching awards and was clearly loved by the students.

Since LeTourneau was a Christian college, every class began with a 3-5 minute devotional (devo), typically Bible reading or commentary with prayer. Bill's devo's were five minute talks at the start of every class (although a couple of them ran close to 20 minutes). They combined his teaching material from "Christianity 100" and "Engineering Theology" in bite-sized chunks. He knew that many students struggled with questions of faith – Do I need to throw my brain away to become a Christian? Is there any evidence that this is true?

Bill emphasized that God was really there, that faith wasn't a blind leap, that God's holy standards are way above any good-bad life curve we'd try to draw, and that there weren't "two pots" of "sacred" and "secular" things in life –it all belonged to God. Many students remembered some of Bill's devo's years after graduation, even if they didn't remember Thevenin equivalent circuits.

Every spring Bill's students in Electrical Lab 3 had to demonstrate a "Rube Goldberg" design project. These were based on the old cartoons by artist Rube Goldberg, where one action causes another, which causes still another, until at the end it does something simple like waking you up or wiping your nose or stamping a grade on a paper. Rube Goldberg projects taught the students creativity, hands-on design, energy conversions, and Murphy's Law, because most would hang up somewhere as dominos fell or balls rolled down a chute. The gym was be full of motors, ball bearings, ramps, pulleys, soldering irons, sparks, and smoke. The whole university would be invited to the demos, and Bill would thoroughly enjoy watching his students' creativity, along with noise and explosions. I was reminded recently that a season's Rube Goldberg was deemed a success if it resulted in a new entry in the next student handbook. For campus safety, these items were forbidden: flaming toasters, flying bowling balls, exploding televisions, indoor rockets, and trash bags filled with acetylene.

Faculty members are expected to hold several office hours each week. Bill held normal office hours, plus help sessions for tests in his living room, Bible studies, counseling for marriage prep, and other open house events. Sunday evenings were reserved for "chilled grease" (grilled cheese sandwiches) and tomato soup, along with open discussion and prayer. All the activities at the house would not have been possible without the active involvement of Igglis. She was the perfect partner for Bill, mom to their three daughters, and "Mom Graff" to hundreds of students.

How would we sum up Bill's life and personality in a few words?

- Brilliant/Creative/Humble
- Witty/ Funny/Unique
- Caring/Devoted to his family
- Passionate about his work
- Rock solid believer in Christ

For me, Bill was

- Super colleague
- Super mentor and role model
- Super friend and brother.

Bill was the only one I knew who

- Knew pi to 30 places
- Could fall asleep standing up
- Could hypnotize a possum by whirling it over his head.

According to 2 Corinthians, Bill Graff is now absent from the body and at home with the Lord. How can we best honor his memory?

We could wear wild ties every day and quote some of his funny expressions (“Hasta la bye-bye”). We will tell stories about him for months. I think that what would honor him most would be to do the things that mattered to him:

“Be ever kind and true.”

Live in a one-pot world, glorifying God in all things.

Love one another fervently and faithfully.

Let the world know that Jesus saves.

I thank God for Bill’s life and impact and the privilege of knowing him.

P. Leiffer

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