Paradoxical professor gives life to literature

By Robert H. Fraass

Editor's Note: This story was written last semester for a depth reporting class in the College of Journalism.

Robert Knoll makes a sudden digression that seems to derail his rapid-fire lecture on William Shakespeare's "Taming of the Shrew."

"Why do we have lights at Christmas?" he asks, his sunken brown eyes darting around the classroom, seeking an explanation.

A woman in the second row finally answers. It has to do with the Winter Solstice, she says. The lights represent how the days are getting longer.

Knoll

Knoll switches themes. Isn't it strange, he notes, that Christians celebrate death in the spring, at Easter.

"We celebrate death in the spring and fertility and birth in the winter. Isn't that paradoxical?" he asks, then smiles. It's a wide, enthusiastic, boyish smile that makes him look younger than his 66 years.

Knoll changes gears again, doing what both he and his students say he does best -- entwine Shakespeare's works with life today.

Today's readers don't understand the traditions Shakespeare uses in "Taming of the Shrew," he tells his class, because they don't understand the origins. Traditions, like celebrating birth in the winter, can be paradoxical.

"Life is a paradox," Knoll is fond of saying.

Knoll, too, is a paradox.

After 38 years at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Robert E. Knoll -- author, English Renaissance and Shakespearian scholar -- is probably one of the university's most-celebrated professors. He says he loves his career. And he loves literature, history, his students, Nebraska and . . . who he is. He says he knows his place in the scheme of things and is happy. But, in turn, he realizes the shortcomings of the things he loves and . . . of himself.

Knoll is quick to talk about his shortcomings, but his students and colleagues would rather talk about his qualities as a professor and as a man.

"The first thing you notice about him is he is interested in just about everything," says Frederick Link, chairman of the UNL English department.

"And that interest, I think, especially for someone who is a senior professor near retirement age . . . for him to maintain the kind of energy and enthusiasm and interest that one usually associates with younger people is remarkable."

Once Knoll retires, he will be greatly missed, Link says.

"We don't replace people like that. You just hire new people and hope that they, 20 or 30 years later, turn out to be like Robert Knoll."

Says English graduate student Steve Hardy: "He's not so much interested in literature, but in what literature says about life. He has the ability to touch people's lives in some way and that's pretty neat."

Student Eric Manley agrees.

"I'm getting a lot more out of it (the Shakespeare class) than I expected," says the business and computer science senior. "I just can't figure out why he's here. I think it says a lot for his character that he stays right here."

Knoll cringes at the label "successful professor." He prefers to say he is a "successful teacher." A successful professor excels in both the classroom and in scholarly work, he says. Knoll says he is not a great scholar.

During his career Knoll has written and edited about 10 books on English literature. He is glad he wrote them, he says, but they aren't very good.

"By the time I was 45, I knew I was not capable of writing a world-beating book," he says.

His biggest contribution, Knoll says, comes in the classroom. Teaching, he says, is the top priority for a professor. Everything else is subordinate.

"What exercises him the most is the pursuit of learning that ignores student," says colleague and long-time friend Les Whipp.

His intense love for teaching has been recognized through the dozens of awards, honors and fellowships he has received over the years. He was named an NU distinguished teacher in 1968 and was voted "Outstanding Nebraskan" by the campus newspaper in 1966.

But one of his greatest honors came last October when he was named the Nebraska Professor of the Year by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE). Whipp says the award, in some ways, was like "a gold watch" honoring the man for a career that will end after the spring semester in 1990.

Knoll says he was honored by the award but tries to keep it in perspective. His attitude vacillates between pride and self-effacement.

"Would I give myself the award?" Knoll asks rhetorically. He pauses, reflecting before he answers. "As a PR thing I think it was probably a pretty good maneuver."

Knoll says he won the CASE award because better teachers are lesser known and because he has enough clout and has had enough publicity that the CASE people could justify giving it to him.

Don't take a statement like this as false modesty, says Whipp.

"It wouldn't occur to Robert to be puffed up about it (the award) so he doesn't have to have a false modesty about it," Whipp says. "He appreciates the honors. He accepts them. But they don't touch the core of the man."

Knoll is a proud man, not an arrogant one, says Link.

"He's been given a lot of credit for things he has done and he has deserved every bit of it," Link says. "But he has never tried to throw his weight around or refused to pull his weight in the little things as well as the big things."

Knoll's colleagues say he does not seek publicity, it comes to him. Knoll says such attention baffles him.

"I am bemused by it. Not amused, but bemused. Do you know what the word 'bemused' means?" he asks.

Knoll pulls a red Webster's Dictionary from a packed office bookshelf.

"To confuse or stupefy. In deep thought," he reads.

Naturally, Knoll says, he is pleased with the awards. But he wonders aloud if he could have made the same contribution in another place, another time, away from Nebraska.

Knoll says he doubts if he could.

His roots are in Nebraska, Knoll says, and that's why he has chosen to stay here. And Knoll acknowledges a certain fear of teaching elsewhere.

"I am not sure that what I do with some success here I could bring off someplace else," Knoll says. "I know who my students are. I know how to talk to these people."

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--Knoll

These skills might not transport well to Stanford, Knoll says, or "even to San Jose Teachers College."

Knowing one's limits, Knoll says, i important. And the award-winning teacher says he knows where he stands in the scheme of things. As a teacher, he says, he is somewhere between "a B-plus and an A-minus." He wishes he had been born smarter, with more patience, and with the ability to achieve higher goals.

It's important, he says, to know what you can and cannot do with your talents. It is a lesson he learned from his father, L.J. Knoll, who, as a banker, failed to see his limits.

"He perpetually, consistently put himself in jobs and situations that were a little too hard for him," Knoll says. "It required more than he had to give. And so he spent his life stretching. And stretching is hard."

'Do I seek things out in order to keep from being bored? Perhaps in part.'

--Knoll

Knoll's roots run deep, here in Nebraska and at the university.

The second of three children, Knoll grew up in Liberty Neb., before moving to Omaha in 1935. His father and mother both graduated from NU in 1910.

Knoll received his undergraduate degree at Nebraska in 1943. He received his master's and Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota.

The rest of Knoll's family have similar ties to NU.

Virginia, Knoll's wife of 35 years, graduated in 1953. His daughter Sarah graduated from NU in 1981, and his son Benjamin graduated from NU in 1983. His sister and his brother also graduated from NU. Only Knoll's daughter Elizabeth went elsewhere. She graduated from Washington University in 1978 and received her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

Most of the Knolls, including Robert, graduated Phi Beta Kappa.

"Our lives are bound up with this institution," Knoll says. "Have I had a good time here? I've had a wonderful time. This university has been very, very good to me."

Knoll shows similar devotion to Nebraska and its people.

Knoll travels to Nebraska towns to instruct high school teachers on literature and teaching. He avidly studies Great Plains literature, one of the many classes he has taught over the years, and once chaired a national conference on Nebraska author Willa Cather. Whipp says Knoll is even responsible for encouraging the planting of Nebraska's native trees and grasses on the Lincoln campus because he felt it would give students a sense of home and security.

Knoll says he loves Nebraska because its people are kind and gentle and have learned to live together happily.

Paradoxically, this gentle nature hurts Nebraska, Knoll says.

"We (Nebraskans) do not play one-upmanship," he says. "We are very nice to each other. Since we don't play one-upmanship, we do not always rise to the height we are capable of achieving. We are not competitive enough to force ourselves to our potential."

This, in turn, has led to what Knoll terms the "tyranny of the mediocrity."

Today's students, he says, need to aspire to great things, bigger goals. People don't set goals high enough, Knoll says, because they don't have enough imagination and because setting high goals is considered pretentious.

"The great trouble with this place is that we love mediocrity," Knoll complains. "(It's) not that mediocre is acceptable, but that the desire to aspire to more than mediocre is looked upon with a certain disfavor."

Setting goals and exploring new possibilities and new challenges excite Knoll.

Knoll has written books, studied at Yale and in England, held positions on several local and national literature and teaching committees, co-hosted a book show, and put together a 12-part series on Shakespeare for Nebraska Public Television.

But his most ambitious project, Knoll says, was his creation of the Centennial Program in 1969 -- a program that received national attention because it was designed to bring the classroom to the dormitories as a community-learning project.

Knoll says this type of professional work helps him stay interested and excited about his career.

"I want to find different types of jobs within the range of my possibilities," Knoll says. "I find new avenues of exploration. And when I discover one avenue is unprofitable, like original research, I try something else."

"Do I seek things out in order to keep from being bored? Perhaps, in part."

Knoll has developed a sense of community similar to the Renaissance Era, says Whipp. The Renaissance, Whipp says, put an emphasis on ethical and community responsibility. Knoll has embodied this philosophy, he says.

"The thing that makes him different is that he is what he teaches," Whipp says. "He believes literature is a way of seeing, and a way of seeing is of a way of being. If it's part of your flesh, it comes out in every gesture in the classroom."

And it does.

Knoll integrates his fast-and-furious lecture with continual questions to students, addressing each as "Mr." or "Miss."

Knoll says he tries to make two or three points the students might have missed reading the literature. The idea, he says, is to get students to say "what I could have said."

Knoll's students say this sometimes frustrates them.

"Sometimes they say I run the show almost entirely. And I just smile to myself because, you bet your life, I run the show," Knoll says. "If I didn't know more about this than they did, what am I doing here?"

Knoll often chooses plays that reflect current events. Since 1988 was an election year, his fall classes included works that have political overtones.

"If I can't show the relationship between 'MacBeth' and the political lives and the private lives of today's politicians, I've let them down," Knoll says.

The final goal of his classes, Knoll says, is to use books and plays to show students how to live their lives. Just as Renaissance literature shaped Knoll's view of his role in the community.

"I don't expect these students to read Shakespeare ever again. I don't expect them to even think about Shakespeare again," Knoll says. "Now, if Shakespeare has done his job and I've done my job, they will know more about life when they are through even though they may not know where they learned it."

It's this kind of thinking, say colleagues and students, that sets Knoll above most teachers, that earned him the prestigious CASE award.

And despite his protests, Knoll says he appreciates the award . . . or at least what it represents.

Knoll connects the significance of the award to the death of his favorite uncle, M.S. McDuffy, a Norfolk lawyer. Knoll was in his early 20s when his uncle died. After his death, his aunt found a letter Knoll had written to his uncle. Knoll wrote that what he wanted out of life, was what his uncle had.

". . . dozens, even hundreds of people came to see him, from as far away as Grand Island, to say farewell to him in his death. He had, in short, been a man of his place and his time," Knoll recalls.

"And this prize I just got," he said, "suggest that maybe I got what I was after."

Epilogue:

"Why then do I remain in Nebraska?
Where would I go? What place is cleaner, kinder,
more courteous, less vindictive?
Why should I leave my home, which is the home of my father,
my grandfather -- and my children?
What money and what intellectual ferment elsewhere
can balance out this sense of time, this sense of place,
this community."

From: "Reflections" by Prof. Robert E. Knoll upon receiving the 1968 University of Nebraska Foundation's Distinguished Teaching Award.

Rotary names UNL professor the Nebraskan of the Year

By Larry Peirce
Senior Reporter

The downtown club of Rotary International named Robert Knoll, a University of Nebraska-Lincoln English professor, its Nebraskan of the Year Tuesday afternoon at the Cornhusker Hotel.

Rotarian and UNL professor Erwin Goldenstein said Knoll has long been a favorite among UNL faculty. In 1971, he said, Nebraska Alumni Association asked faculty members to name their favorite professor.

Knoll was named most frequently, he said.

Don Miller, a rotarian and UNL professor of mathematics and statistics, said he nominated Knoll for the award. As a member of a committee which reviewed nominations for the college of arts and sciences teaching awards, Miller read comments about Knoll in letters of nomination.

"One thing that really struck me in the letters was how much . . . Robert Knoll was able to excite students of all ages, from freshman to people in their retirement years," Miller said.

NU President Ronald Roskens spoke briefly at the banquet, and said Knoll "is not just an everyday professor." Roskens said Knoll's dedication to teaching has influenced "countless thousands."

In his acceptance speech, Knoll spoke of people and changes at UNL during the last 50 years. Knoll came to NU in 1940. After graduating, he returned to teach in 1950, and has been here since. In 1980, he was named a George Holmes professor of English, named for the man who gave money to UNL for the position.

Knoll said it is more of a challenge to teach at UNL than at Harvard, which has more money, the most dedicated students, the most powerful friends and the longest traditions.

"Teaching in a privileged place is shooting fish in a barrel, one of my friends told me last week," Knoll said.

"But here we have worked with less money, more naive students, few powerful friends, short traditions of excellence -- and we have brought learning, historically available only to the few, to all who think they might profit from it."

UNL has managed to keep many of its classes small to better serve students, he said.

"The students need and want a mix, a variety of teaching styles," he said. "They deserve both seminars and lectures, not an exclusive diet of either, for they need and want both close individual attention and considerable personal freedom. Diversity is the key.

"Over the years my university has withstood temptations to cave in to vested interests. We have asked the hard questions, and been supported in our search for answers."