



IN MEMORIAM

Waldo Phelps
Professor of English, Emeritus
Los Angeles
1918–2004

When Waldo Phelps arrived at UCLA in 1949, he came to a very different, very smaller university. As he mulled over the job offer he had received from the Department of English, he and his father together climbed Janss Steps. “This opportunity is second to none,” Phelps remembered his father telling him as they surveyed together the fledgling campus. “It’s a young university, and you can get in on the ground floor.” Though getting in on the ground floor may not have seemed attractive to many newly minted Ph.D.s, Phelps had university building in his blood. His father, born like Abraham Lincoln in a log cabin in Kentucky, came west to earn a Ph.D. at Stanford. The elder Phelps eventually became president of the home Economics and Manual Arts Training Center in Santa Barbara, only to transform it by stages, first into Santa Barbara State College and then into UCSB. So the younger Phelps, true to his family tradition, got in on the ground floor and signed on with the English Department where he taught courses in rhetoric and public address. Eventually he was instrumental in founding the Department of Speech, which he chaired from 1964 to 1971. His courses in the rhetoric of Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Truman ranked among the most popular on the campus among several generations of students. In 2000, UCLA TODAY named him one of the “Top 20 Professors” of UCLA’s first century.

Appropriately for a man who would later become the public face of the University, Phelps was born on June 15, 1918, in Stanford University Hospital to Clarence Lucien Phelps and Ann Livengood Phelps. One could say that he virtually spent his entire life in an academic setting. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Santa Barbara, where his father was to become president of the campus that would eventually become UCSB. Graduating from Santa Barbara High School in 1936, he enrolled in his father’s campus, by then known as Santa Barbara State College, where he became the first president of Blue Key, a national men’s service fraternity, and met his future wife, Dorothy Ann Depweg. Having received his A.B. degree in education in 1940, he then spent a year at the University of Denver, where he received his M.A. degree in speech communication in 1941. War service in the Navy represented perhaps his first real foray beyond the groves of academe, but after his discharge he married Dorothy and returned to university life, this time at USC, where he received his Ph.D. in rhetoric and public address in 1949. He initially agreed to stay on at USC as faculty, but when the chance came to get in on the ground floor at UCLA, he jumped at it.

Always a popular teacher, Phelps claimed that whatever else he did, “the most important function for me was always to teach undergraduates as effectively as I could. I wouldn’t do any writing or reading, or anything for that matter, before thinking about the next class session.” Nevertheless, his interests in public oratory inevitably made him an authority on the ceremonial side of academic life. In 1960, he was named chairman of Communication on Public Ceremonies, a post that put him in charge of organizing commencement ceremonies, but also in charge of protocol for the visits of such important dignitaries as former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Prince Philip, the Shah of Iran, and former President Lyndon Johnson. He told wonderful stories about the FBI “just about peeking out of manholes” during Johnson’s visit, and his attempts to organize deans and other FBI VIPs to behave themselves into an effective ceremonial.

Eisenhower once complimented the organization of his visit by remarking “That is the clearest, briefest battle order I’ve heard in years.”

Phelps helped the university grow into prominence in many ways, but among the most important services he rendered were those that reflected his own academic specialty: rhetoric and public address. He spent many long hours arguing for bond issues so that the University could have the money it needed to grow. He often went to Sacramento on UC Day to speak for the budget. He sometimes mused that “I can look at the Law School, the Medical Center, and the Graduate School of Management and personally look back with a great amount of pleasure.”

When the University decided to rationalize Departmental structures by phasing out Speech as a separate department, Phelps was welcomed back into the English Department. He retired in 1988 from the Department that first hired him in 1949, and returned to Santa Barbara, where he took a more active role in the UCSB Alumni Association and became an enthusiastic supporter of Santa Barbara City College. In retirement, he delighted in writing about his father’s accomplishments, and he enjoyed spending time at the former site of the College on Santa Barbara’s Riviera hillside, revisiting the years of his father’s tenure there.

He died January 31, 2004, at Cottage Hospital, Santa Barbara, at the age of 85. He is survived by his daughter Margaret Ann Phelps of Los Angeles, his daughter Marilyn Phelps McNamara, and his son-in-law Jim McNamara of Cape Town, South Africa. He was predeceased by his first wife, Dorothy Ann Depweg Phelps, and his second wife, Nancy Kern Phelps.

Gordon Kipling