

Rodney Allen Mulvania
LSTC's "Little Prince"
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For first time writers of an "Oral History," Rodney Mulvania is both an excellent and difficult subject. He is excellent because he answers questions at length, with a warm, engaging manner. His answers are sometimes circuitous, but with Rodney the journey is half the fun. He is difficult for the same reasons. His style is so warm and engaging that you find yourself mesmerized by his stories and before you know it, the story is over and you have no notes. It is easy to imagine that being a student in one of his classes is an education of subject and life.

Rodney repeatedly made a point of telling us something he often told his students. The important things in life are family, friends, and having fun in your chosen profession. Possessions and money are not near the top of Rodney's list of important things, though he did remark that having money was better than not having it. In Rodney's own way, he was giving us the same advice that the fox gave the little prince: "And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye."¹

The first impression of Rodney is neatly disheveled, and friendly; all rolled up in energy and enthusiasm for whatever task is at hand. If you have seen pictures of Dr. Einstein, you know the look. When you shake his hand, you know that this man is familiar with tools, and his eyes twinkle with the wisdom of age. When he is asked a question, his eyes will slowly close as he responds, almost as if the memory is a movie that he is narrating. His humor is subtle, though ever present.

Rodney's journey to Linn State Technical College (LSTC)² begins in 1962. While in graduate school at the University of Missouri, he met his future wife Paula. After completing one semester he

¹ "The Little Prince" by Antoine de Saint-Exupery.

² The proper name of the College was Linn Technical College from its inception until Jul 1, 1996 when the name was officially changed to Linn State Technical College.

quit school. "I went down to Weldon Springs to get a stake, and I came back to Columbia and we got married that June (1963). But I had enough money to support us." Paula and Rodney went to school over the summer. "Her mother paid for her schooling because she thought Paula should finish her degree. We agreed that I would pay her room and board and she would pay for her tuition," Rodney says with a chuckle.

By the fall of 1964, Paula and Rodney had obtained teaching jobs in St. Louis, MO. They taught there for several years before coming to the realization that big city life was not for them. "In the meantime we decided to move to the country. They put ads in the St. Louis paper. I knew the Tech school was here in fledgling condition. My thoughts at the time are there are jobs in the area, they may not pay very much but there is something I can do." Rodney had a friend in the Linn area, and, when visiting, he looked for a place in his price range. Over Easter of 1970 he met Mr. Thurman Willett, and Rodney remarked, "He was a wonderful person." Mr. Willett gave him a job as biology teacher and school bus driver at Linn High School.

In 1976 Rodney had a visit from Jack Light, head of the math department at LSTC. "I don't know how he knew about me; he just came over there one day, in my room, and he asked me if I would like a job (as Physics instructor)." Rodney's acceptance was the start of a long and varied career at LSTC.

Rodney taught at LSTC from 1976 – 1994 and 1996 – 2005. He taught various subjects including physics, math, Aviation Maintenance, and HVAC. Rodney said, "My undergraduate major was in math, and biology, a double major actually, and a minor in education." In 1965 he received his Masters in Education. When asked how he became involved with the aviation and HVAC programs he said, "I had theory and experience, and that's all I'd need." Rodney told us that he had on-the-job

training for HVAC working part-time at the local Sears store as an appliance repairman. While working there, he also took correspondence courses from Whirlpool. We also learned that in 1965 he received his Pilot License, and in 1969 received his Airframe and Power Plant License. Rodney's knowledge is both broad and deep. He made the point that, "There are common threads in all technical courses." When asked when he knew that teaching was what he wanted to do, he said, "There really was no ah-ha! moment. I did it by default at the start." It was almost as if teaching had selected Rodney.

When discussing his teaching style, Rodney said, "In all my years teaching, I could count the number of students that failed on one hand, maybe two, but that's it." Later he added, "We had a good time." Rodney also has an interesting definition for books, "I've always thought that's what a book was, built in, orderly knowledge, and that's what I used to tell my kids." During the interview he related Calandra's barometer story³ to us and chuckles at the part of the story where the student offers the barometer to the janitor in exchange for information. He concludes saying, "I'm not that dogmatic."

Rodney said the mission of LSTC was different than that of a four year school. "You know it's different teaching a related as opposed to a major. It's just different teaching the major you know. You're really trying to give them the training they're going to need to get along in their chosen field. They've made a choice, and they want to leave with the information it takes to complete those tasks. We emphasized doing, get with the program, and don't waste your time."

Rodney commented on student behavior in the classroom. "I had a student one time that you know, for almost 2 years I wouldn't have given you the powder to blow him up. He came in red-eyed

³ "Angels on the Head of a Pin, A Modern Parable", by Alexander Calandra

all the time for one reason or another that I wouldn't speculate on what he had been doing... He worked diligently at avoiding doing anything... He looked like anything but an aviation mechanic... You know, you never lose hope." Near the end of the second year the student starts coming to the class clean shaven, neatly dressed and attentive. Rodney continues saying, "They all go down to Georgia to interview with Delta (airlines). By golly, when they come back, he is the only one with a job. And was very successful in his career with Delta." When asked if he was surprised, Rodney replies, "He didn't really surprise me because I always knew he could do it. I wasn't sure that he would but he did."

Rodney shared his views on LSTC becoming a college. "It was difficult for me to believe that it really happened because we'd worked toward it for so many years, to try and get the accreditation it deserved. We knew we had a good idea and a going thing, but it took awhile to get the legislature to believe that too."

In 1994 Rodney retired after teaching for 34 years. For the next couple of years he and Paula traveled, and in 1996 he responded to an ad in the paper for a physics teaching position at LSTC. Because Linn Tech was now a college, he could accept the job and continue to receive his retirement. In 2005 he retired once more. He says he doesn't miss it now, but you can't help but believe that if LSTC really needed him he would answer the call to the best of his ability.

It seems fitting that the reader's last impression of Rodney Mulvania is with the important things in his life. Rodney and Paula have three children: Peggy, Kerry, and Andrew. Peggy, the oldest, is a teacher at Linn High School in Linn, MO. Kerry, the middle child, is a successful Lawyer (Family Law) in Columbia, MO, though at heart she is a starving artist. Andrew, the youngest, is a Professor at Washington and Jefferson College in Washington, PA and published writer of poetry.

Who knew that our first "Oral History" would result in meeting such a character, so full of insight about the truly important things in life? He was undoubtedly a great instructor, but his greatest achievement is his "Life 101" class that he taught daily to his students, and is still teaching to anyone willing to listen.

THE END

Raw material

"Oil is a finite resource and the harder we chase it the sooner we'll run out." Told his students starting in the 1970's

Drove his electric town car around auto tech and when people would look he would smile, wave and remark "You know you're looking at the future."

"If they wanted us to dress up, we'd dress nicely." Talking about Tie Day's.

"You're teaching to everybody not just teaching to the favorite few."

"I don't necessarily agree with the idea that anybody can be president you know, anybody might get elected but they simply aren't up to the job."

He'd even go as far to say "Students that go to this school are good people."

Mr. Mulvania retired from Linn State Technical College in 1994' and began traveling with his wife. In 1996 Mulvania responded to an ad for a physics teacher at LSTC.

Mulvania and his wife Paula raised three children, Peggy, Kerry, and Andrew. Peggy the oldest of the three is the Family and Consumer Science(FACS) teacher at the Linn High School. Kerry, the middle child obtained a masters in philosophy from the University of Colorado, then later went on to also obtain a law degree. She is also an accomplished artist. Andrew the youngest child is a Professor at Washington and Jefferson University in Washington, PA and has published books of poetry.

Pilots license – 1965 at Lambert Field in St. Louis, MO.

Airframe and Powerplant License – 1969

Mulvania told how he taught his physics class to calculate the speed of a bullet using a 4 x 4 block of wood, some strings, rulers, and .22 caliber pistol. He said that over the years they went through several blocks of wood.