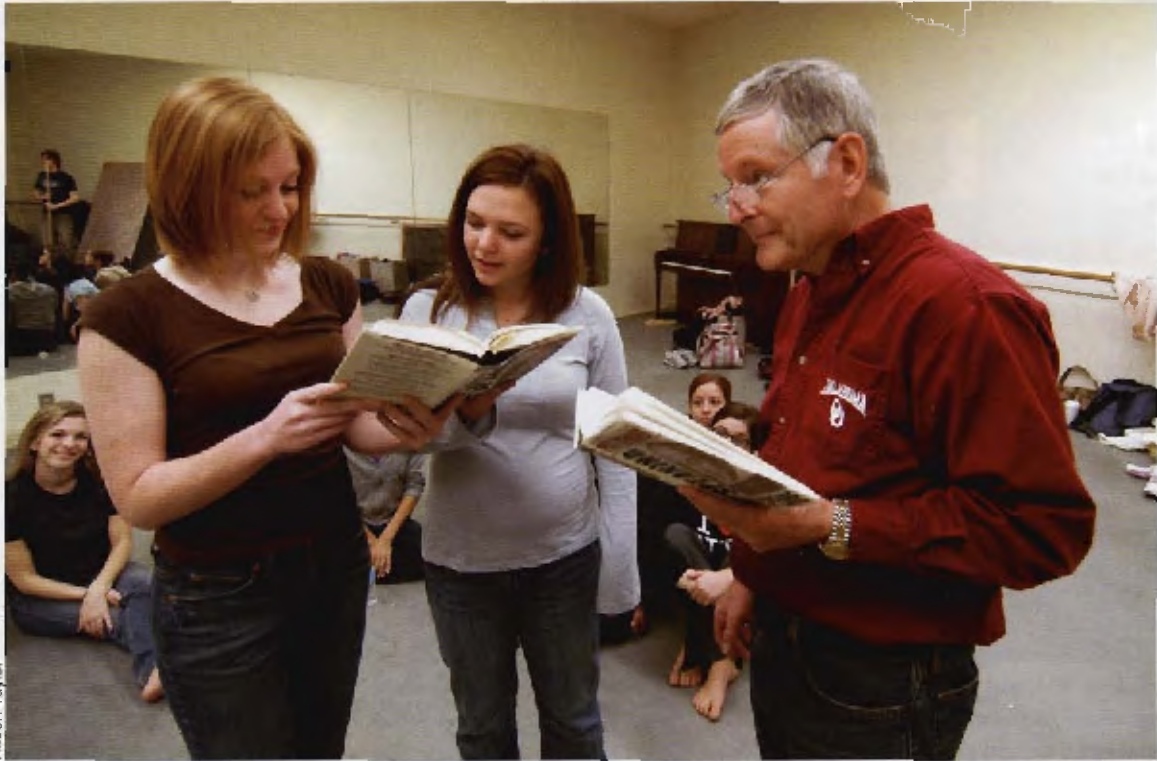


After a successful career in engineering, this alumnus has chosen the campus as his retirement venue—and he is having the time of his life.



Robert Taylor

Drama students (from left) Rachel Kerbs, Amanda Swistak and Frank Gilson are called upon to read a scene from Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" during class.

Frank Gilson's OU

BY BILL MOAKLEY

The 50-inch, high-definition, plasma-screen television residing in the home of Frank Gilson may be the loneliest TV set in Oklahoma. In Gilson's life, especially when school is in session at the University of Oklahoma, there is precious little time for channel-surfing.

Gilson, a retired chemical engineer who devoted his entire 35-year career to Phillips Petroleum Company, prefers to spend his time in classrooms, concert and performance halls, and at sporting venues. At the age of 65, he well may be one of the most active people on the OU campus.

Owing to a general love of learning and a more specific love of the University, Gilson has forsaken the stereotypical senior trappings of golf courses and all-you-can-eat buffets for days filled with lectures, nights taken up by concerts and athletic events, and meals eaten in Oklahoma Memorial Union, Couch Cafeteria and on Campus Corner. Gilson enrolls in 15 to 18 hours of classes each semester, most in the liberal arts, on an audit—or non-credit—basis. His motivation is simple: "Doing something like this is stimulating," the outgoing and enthusiastic Gilson explains. "It's good for the mind."

A native of Shattuck, Gilson and his three siblings grew up on the family farm originally purchased by his maternal grandfather, Virgil Wilson, an early-day Buick dealer in western Oklahoma. A childhood filled with work and school left little time for exposure to such things as the arts.

"My mother could play the piano a little, but other than that, there is just no music or acting talent in our family whatsoever," Gilson says. "Coming from a small town, I really had no exposure to the arts. I was more scientifically inclined in school. I loved chemistry, physics and math. They were all so obvious to me."

What was not so obvious as a young man, Gilson remembers, is what he might like to do with his life. He would stumble onto his choice of careers as a freshman at OU.

"I had a friend in Wilson Center who said, 'I am going to be a chemical engineer,'" Gilson recalls. "I thought, I think that's what I want to do as well. So that's how I decided on chemical engineering. Later, [my friend] flunked out. I persevered."

He persevered despite a slow start in his first math course.

"I had a rather poor academic background in high school," Gilson says of his less than auspicious beginning in math at OU. "I had good chemistry and physics teachers, but I didn't have a good math background. I had taken every math course offered and never saw such things as the quadratic formula."

He retook that first college math course, determined to improve. He did, earning an A the second time around.

"From then on, I loved math, and everything was wonderful," Gilson says. "The logic of it all made sense. I found I could understand it and keep up."

Gilson graduated from OU in 1964 with a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering and immediately went to work for Phillips, spending some of his early years in Borger, Texas, before moving to corporate headquarters in Bartlesville. During his three and a half decades with the company, he worked in numerous departments, including general engineering, environmental sciences, research and development, and marketing. He feels

fortunate to have spent his whole career with one company.

"That doesn't happen much anymore, and it won't happen much in the future," Gilson notes.

Eyeing retirement and wondering what would come next, Gilson cast his eye toward the Norman and Oklahoma City area, which would allow him to be close to his alma mater and experience that which had eluded him during his undergraduate days on campus: an immersion in the arts and culture.

He has pursued that objective both intellectually and financially, giving generously to OU, especially in the arts. Among other things, he is a member of the Commitment of 50, a group of 50 supporters who each gave \$50,000 to the maintenance endowment for the new Reynolds Performing Arts Center. The center includes the renovated and expanded Holmberg Hall, which is once again among the region's top performance halls. Other programs, including athletics, also have benefited from Gilson's philanthropy. On a more personal note, he has assisted numerous students with various expenses as they struggle to cover

the costs of a college education.

"I've been very lucky," Gilson says. "I've had a good career, and I feel fortunate to be in a position to be able to give back to this university. I love this place."

He also loves learning, which has led to his returning to campus as a student, this time with an emphasis on liberal arts. The first time around, as an engineering major, Gilson remembers he had room for only nine hours of electives. Even with the broader range of courses offered to today's students, Gilson wishes more emphasis were placed on the liberal arts.

"I have a basic belief that all students need a far better liberal arts education than they are allowing themselves," he says. "People who want to be engineers or business people or whatever—they all should take a fairly broad range of courses in history, great literature, etc., just to be exposed to various fields and ideas."

A typical semester for Gilson might include a political science, religious studies, or art or music appreciation class. Whatever the course, Gilson says he always has been welcomed by students and professors alike.

"Students here today are the nicest



Lynette Lobban

The second half of an OU women's basketball game turns into a knuckle-biter for Gilson and fellow fans at the Lloyd Noble Center. The OU alumnus is an avid Sooner fan and rarely misses a home game.

Exercising with dowel rods helps Gilson and classmates deepen their breath and increase resonance in Rena Cook's voice and diction class in the School of Drama. Gilson, a retired chemical engineer, audits between 15 and 18 hours of classes each semester.



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people I have ever met," he says with a wide smile. "They're so tolerant now, more accepting of everybody. They've been great."

Gilson says the only difficulty he has encountered with his younger classmates is assigning names to faces.

"They all look alike," he says with a laugh. "I mean, they're all young and handsome or pretty. When I'm walking on campus, students will walk by and say, 'Hey, you're in my class.' I stand out because I have a full head of gray hair, and I'm older. I look different. It's easy for them, but not for me."

Professors, Gilson says, also have warmly accepted him into their classrooms.

"They're all very open and always welcoming," he notes. "Many of them have offered to bring in an extra chair if there isn't any room. I think they enjoy having me in class. A few have invited me to take part in other courses, so I think they like having me here. I don't create a nuisance, and I try not to be intrusive."

Gilson, who often enjoys a leisurely lunch or coffee break on campus with his new classmates, says he refrains from handing out too much advice. However, he does make suggestions to fellow students when enrollment time comes around.

"A young student may not ever have heard of some of the great professors we have here. I tell them about courses I have taken or professors I have enjoyed. I encourage them to look at a wide range of areas."

One professor Gilson endorses is already a familiar face to most, if not all, OU students. After returning to campus, one of the first courses he enrolled in was the political science

course taught by President David Boren.

"He is so wonderful as a teacher," Gilson explains. "His experiences really add to the class. And because of those experiences, he has the authority to say, 'This is how Congress works.'"

Gilson is proud of the changes, both physical and intellectual, that have taken place at OU since his days as an undergraduate student in the 1960s. He gives most credit to Boren for his leadership and vision for the University.

"Obviously, the campus is much bigger and more beautiful," he points out. "Academically, it's a much better school than when I was here. The biggest difference is that the caliber of students is much higher in every way. Students here today are incredibly bright and talented. It's fascinating to interact with them on a regular basis."

Gilson's return to campus has allowed him to nurture his love of the arts, a love born, in part, by that lack of artistic ability he cites as a family trait. In addition to the time he spends in classrooms discussing literature, religion or philosophy, Gilson spends many nights taking in the performing arts.

"I see virtually every concert and every play [performed on campus]," he notes. "To me, one of the greatest things in the

world is seeing people on stage. They memorize sometimes two or three hours of dialogue and then go on stage and make it so real. That is just something that I believe to be genius at work.

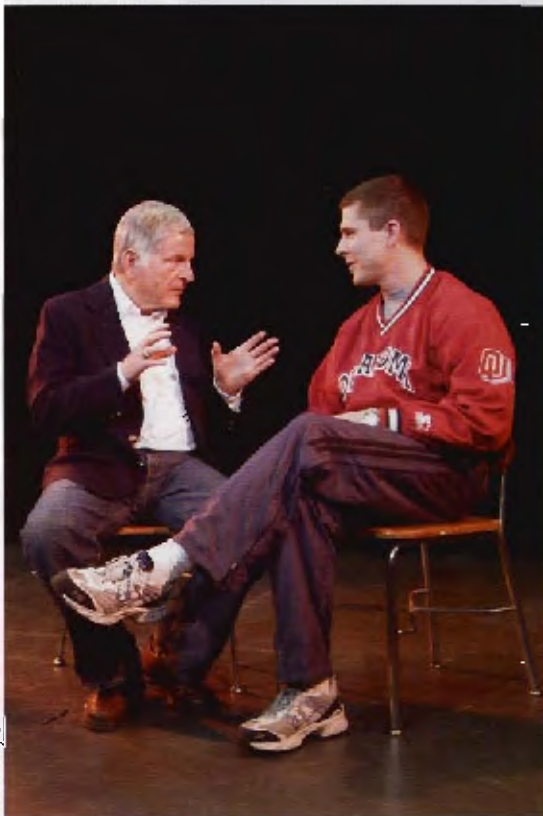
"Think of a piano student here, working on any number of pieces of classical music, who can then go out on stage and play for an hour and a half or two hours. That is magic. That is genius. That's why I support the arts."

Gilson's support of the University on the whole, although varied, is perhaps best exemplified by his specific support of the School of Drama. In addition to establishing the Frank Gilson Award, given annually to a senior drama student in effort to aid in the transition to professional life, Gilson also gives to University Theatre, a producing organization made up of the School of Drama, School of Dance and the Department of Musical Theatre. In addition, he provided the funds to build and outfit what is now called the Gilson Studio Theatre in Old Science Hall, an intimate 88-seat, black box theatre that is completely student run and available for productions that might otherwise not be staged on campus.

"It's an amazing performance space that was an empty classroom before Frank came along," says Tom Huston Orr, di-



Robert Taylor



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larly challenged and figures out a way to make a difference. This kind of support and advocacy has made all of the difference for the School of Drama.”

So, in his mid-60s, Frank Gilson is finding fulfillment on a campus populated mostly by members of a younger generation, in classrooms and at events that cultivate the growth of the mind and spirit. But one is still left to wonder if Gilson ever thinks about slowing down. Maybe retire to that family farm in Shattuck, a place where he and a brother still run a few cattle?

“No, no, no, no, no,” he insists. “Being involved and being around people is what life is about. Life is about relationships.”

ABOVE: After class Gilson frequently meets fellow students for coffee and conversation. From left, Bláz Bush, Linda Tiller, development officer for the Weitzenhoffer Family College of Fine Arts, and Jenny Satwalekar join Gilson at the coffee shop in Bizzell Memorial Library.

LEFT: Gilson is not a passive patron of the arts, but an active contributor. Here, he confers with Tom Huston Orr, director of the School of Drama, about an upcoming production. “He’s our best advertising and our best marketing,” says Orr. “He is an advocate for us and believes in what we’re doing.”

stay in touch through the program,” Orr says.

“He has become a fan of what we’re doing, and that kind of support is tremendous. He’s our best advertising and our best marketing. He is an advocate for us and believes in what we’re doing.”

That advocacy, Orr says, is nothing short of a lifeline for the arts.

“The arts really can’t exist without people like Frank Gilson,” he declares. “We haven’t throughout history. You need a patron class that has tremendous respect and passion for the arts and the financial ability to nurture and support them. Frank fits that bill.

“It’s a regular, reoccurring event for Frank to pop in my office and say, ‘Hey, I have an idea.’ He identifies potential problems or areas where we are particu-

Then does that mean the high-definition television is just collecting dust?

“I love it when I’m home,” Gilson admits. “But I would much rather be on campus, at a concert, play or lecture. I’ve had season football tickets since 1965 and have season tickets to women’s basketball. I just love being on campus.”

That love of campus, love of learning and interacting with fellow students has provided something for Gilson that rarely is found in front of a television, however large the set or sharp the picture.

“Being on this campus is enriching in many ways,” he explains. “Willa Cather, the great Pulitzer Prize-winning author said, ‘The journey is all.’ I think I know what she meant. This is a journey, and it’s a good one.”

Bill Moakley, communications director for the OU College of Education, writes freelance articles for Sooner Magazine.

rector of the School of Drama.

Gilson’s support of the drama program, and the arts in general, goes beyond check writing and ticket buying. Orr says Gilson has made it a point to be active in the lives of students.

“Frank is invested in what we’re doing here; he is invested in the kids. He will identify freshmen he thinks have potential, build relationships with them and