

Former professor, 99, kept language program alive

Astrid Williams was well known for her love of languages and her dedication to students

By Teri Meeuwsen
Higher Education Reporter

She single-handedly kept the Scandinavian languages alive during her 31 years as a professor at the University. She touched the lives of many as she introduced thousands of students to her native language and culture.

Professor Emerita Astrid Williams died Nov. 16, 1997. She was 99.

Williams came to the United States in 1908 from her native country, Norway, and earned a master's degree in 1934 at the University. Later, she earned her master's degree in German at the University of Marburg in Europe. She returned to the University in 1935 with a Ph.D. to teach Norwegian and German.

During her years at the University, she faced challenges. With budget cuts taking place at the University, Scandinavian languages were on the chopping block. But with her dedication and love of languages, Williams worked to keep them alive, said Ingrid Weatherhead, a retired Germanic language professor.

"She was so dedicated," she said. "At the time teaching 12 hours was rare for a person, but she taught 18 hours at a time in language and literature courses in Swedish, Norwe-

gian and German."

Weatherhead audited a couple of William's classes to experience her teaching practices.

"When she was in class, you always felt like she was talking to you," she said. "She was very interested in you as the human being."

Peter Gontrum, a retired Germanic language professor who also worked with Williams, said students would keep in touch with her years after they took her courses.

"She was very sociable," he said. "A couple of students would have dinner with her every so often, even after she retired [in 1972]. People would bring her things a lot and visit with her and have a cup of Norwegian coffee."

Williams' work and dedication at the University was rewarded by her native country in 1968. She was presented with the Order of St. Olav by the Royal Norwegian Consulate in Portland for Olav V., the king of Norway at the time.

Williams didn't receive a great amount of financial recognition for her work at the University, said Virpi Zuck, head of the Germanic Languages Department. In 1938, her salary was first budgeted at \$2,200 a year, but was reduced to \$1,960 a year because of the depression.

"She was never, at least, financially, rewarded for the work she did," she said. "But the students were definitely rewards in themselves. She had the burning desire and the determination to keep the Scandinavian languages alive."

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