



Adam Amato Emerald

Barbara Hort, a former graduate student of Myron Rothbart, congratulates Rothbart on his career and his 'retirement.'

Colleagues gather to honor 'retired' professor

Though officially retired, Professor Myron Rothbart will continue psychology research into social stereotypes

By Serena Markstrom
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A farmer owns some land near the border between Russia and Poland, but he doesn't know in which country his land is located. So he contacts a local surveyor to solve this problem for him.

"Your land is in Poland," declares the surveyor.

"Good," says the farmer. "Now I won't have to endure those Russian winters."

This is one of social psychologist Myron Rothbart's favorite jokes, as recalled Friday during the "Mush and Gush" portion of a weekend-long celebration of Rothbart's career. Rothbart has spent a great deal of this career dedicated to studying the often arbitrary nature of categorical thinking and labeling.

"I was very nervous and anxious about this but I have enjoyed every minute of it," Rothbart said of the "Mush and Gush." "I have been extremely fortunate in my life."

Rothbart has been teaching at the University since 1969. He officially retired in 1999 to opt for an early retirement incentive offered by the Oregon Public Employees Retirement System. He also has a research grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, good until 2004. Rothbart will continue as the principal investigator of the Social Psychology Lab in Straub Hall and advising graduate students. He and his team are working to understand categorical thinking, the nature of social stereotypes and the role of these thought processes in intergroup relations. Retirement is a technicality, not a practical reality.

Psychology Professor Sara Hodges started planning the events more than six months ago and colleagues from around the country came to honor Rothbart's career. "It's a good time to mark it," said Hodges, who jokingly equated the planning process to planning a wedding.

During the morning "Mush and Gush" portion, Hodges read letters from colleagues and former students who couldn't make the trip. Many people present recalled memories of meeting Rothbart and one person read a David Letterman style "Top 10" list of reasons "Mick" Rothbart will enjoy retirement. A group from Padua, Italy, where Rothbart took a sabbatical, sent a video of a dinner party they had in Rothbart's honor. Jim Sherman came from Indiana University in Bloomington to take part in the festivities, which also included a trip to the coast. "Mick has been one of my heroes in social psychology," said Sherman, whose specialty is social cognition. "He does it with such integrity."

Friday afternoon, Rothbart colleagues Bernadette Park, Joachim Krueger, and Dave Hamilton gave talks on how Rothbart's research has influenced their own. Park said she regularly assigns Rothbart's papers to her students at the University of Colorado and they have told her they find the material useful. He takes complicated cognitive processes and puts them into real context so students understand, Park said. "I see his influence everywhere," Park said. Such as "when I find myself working Woody Allen into lectures."

Rothbart said he had an interest in the psychology that leads to discrimination since he was a teenager. "Seeing the injustices done to blacks and others, you start wondering, 'What's the psychology of this?'" Rothbart said. "And wondering how can it change. It's a problem of tremendous social implication. "If we can make any change on this problem that has caused so much human suffering ...," Rothbart said, "if I can make any dent, my life will have been worthwhile." At 63, Rothbart still has a lot of questions unanswered and he said he enjoys conducting research. The No. 1 reason on the "Top 10": He can work longer hours and is no longer required to take vacation days.