‘End of an era’ in English dept. marked by panel honoring retiring professors

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University of Louisiana at Lafayette English staff and students picked the brains of iconic professors, all set to retire this year, in a roundtable panel discussion titled “The Faculty: Reflections on Life and Literature.”

Christine DeVine, Ph.D.; Skip Fox, Ph.D.; Mary Ann Wilson, Ph.D.; and Jerry McGuire, Ph.D., will be leaving their department at the end of the semester. English department head Dayana Stetco wrote that the quartet’s departure “marks the end of an era.” To commemorate this end, they met on April 20 in Oliver Hall.

Stetco stated that, throughout all English concentrations, the four professors have molded the department’s very “goals, mission and identity.”

Prior to the panel, Wilson said the four professors chose to personalize the all-encompassing subject of the discussion panel, using their “own personal challenges in the profession.”

Wilson said she was married before she earned her doctorate, and after having children, she realized her interests in literature compelled her to continue pursuing a career.

After completing her dissertation at Georgia State University, Wilson moved with her family to Louisiana and began teaching at UL Lafayette. She said it was here that her academic study became focused on female writers of academia and literature and then Louisiana research.

Wilson said everyone’s simultaneous retirement was “just a coincidence” with the professors signifying a shift in the department’s operation.

“I know we’ve recently hired two new creative writers,” Wilson said, “and that’s one of the biggest components of our Ph.D. programs.”

Wilson called it a “step in the right direction,” and she said she hopes the literature positions she and DeVine represent are also filled.

Of her multiple endowments and awards, Wilson holds the James D. Wilson Endowed Professorship in Southern Studies.

Wilson added she most enjoyed her involvement with the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities’ program called Summer Teacher Institute. Wilson wrote grants and taught courses to other teachers for the sole-purpose of enrichment.

“I want to lead what I call the un-footnoted life,” Wilson said of her retirement. Wilson, who has plans to move back to Georgia once the semester ends, said she’ll miss many things about Louisiana, which has a “different brand of southern culture.”

James McDonald, Ph.D., served as the moderator for the panel discussion.

“In two weeks when their retirement is official,” McDonald said, “I’ll be the oldest old fart amongst the English graduate faculty.”

“I dedicated my life to poetry in 1969, when I was running around the country and basically homeless,” Fox said.

Since then, Fox has led a 37-year career as a professor at UL Lafayette, has worked as a bibliographer for the “MLA International Bibliography” and has extensively studied and annotated a bibliography on three contemporary American poets.

Fox called writing “the most humanly, artistically, emotionally, compelling activity that I can consider” that he can access.

“I’m sure music and art are equally compelling, but I am barred from those,” he quipped.

With a poetry collection and fiction in the works, Fox added he’ll write until he’s “too demented to turn on the computer.”

McGuire has taught a variety of subjects at UL Lafayette, ranging from creative writing, 20th century literature and literature theory.

“I’m getting ready to retire and thinking different thoughts and feeling different feelings, you know, the way it is when you are in adolescence,” he said.

McGuire said his speech was “fragmentary and unresolved,” and so he found it would be easiest to compile them together. McGuire called it “five quotes, a dream and a poem.”

De Vine said she decided to discuss what kept her passionate about teaching during her speech. Having moved from England to the U.S., DeVine said her first career was operating an ad agency with her husband. She attended fiction workshops at a local library and eventually found herself at local colleges, listening to seminars by literary professors.

“I suddenly realized one could earn a living by reading, writing and talking about literature,” she said.

De Vine said it was at this point,

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when her and her husband’s ad agency was no longer feasible, that she decided to attend graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

DeVine has taught 19th-century British literature among other subjects for the past 17 years at UL Lafayette.

“I found that no matter my mood, no matter what’s happening in life, teaching can raise my spirits and students can renew my enthusiasm for well trodden literary texts and unfamiliar ones,” DeVine said.