



Retiring professor William Breit, right, is honored by his students at a farewell “tamalada.”

Distinguished Professor of Economics Retires After 19 Years at Trinity

COMEDY'S LOSS WAS TRINITY'S GAIN.

“Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

That cliched rejection may have cost the world a great stand-up comedian, but it got Trinity one heck of a professor.

As a young man, William Breit, the Vernon Taylor Distinguished Professor of Economics, dreamed of a career as a stand-up comedian. Indeed, he worked his way through college entertaining at local clubs, military bases, and veterans’ hospitals. It was the era of the Korean War and hospitals were full of injured or wounded military personnel. Breit would do his show, which would be piped into the rooms of the soldiers who were too ill to come to the auditorium. Afterwards, he would visit their rooms. “I’d stick my head in and say, ‘Did you hear my show, or were you sick before?’ It always made them laugh,” he says with a nostalgic grin.

Breit’s routines generated enough laughs and fans to earn him a trip to New York to

audition for the Arthur Godfrey Talent Scouts show. Because his mother heartily disapproved of his career choice, he promised her if he got turned down, he would give up comedy and do something else.

Despite his local success, the audition went badly. “They had me audition with no audience, and that is very difficult for a comedian. It threw my timing completely off. It was terrible,” Breit remembers. He came home to Texas, burned all his old jokes, and decided to become an economist.

As it turned out, Breit became not just an economist, but an extremely distinguished economist. After a year as an undergraduate at Trinity, Breit went to the University of Texas at Austin, where he earned both an undergraduate and a master’s degree. After earning his Ph.D. at Michigan State University—which honored him with its Distinguished Alumnus Award two years ago—he embarked on a teaching career that took him first to Louisiana State University, the University of Virginia, where he spent 18 years, and ultimately to Trinity in 1983.

Although highly skeptical at first, Breit says he was lured to Trinity by the “very persuasive” then-president Ron Calgaard. “I’ve never regretted it,” says Breit, who grew up in San Antonio and still has family here.

Early in his tenure at Trinity, he happened to sit next to Calgaard on a plane to Houston, where both men were to attend different meetings. When Calgaard asked him what he intended to do to “put the economics department on the map” Breit had an answer. With the enthusiastic support of Calgaard, Breit originated the Nobel Economist Lecture Series. The first year, he brought in seven of the living Nobel economists who were affiliated with American universities. Among the most notable were Milton Friedman and Paul Samuelson. He sent the elegant brochures, which featured a gold foil-embossed Nobel medal on the cover, to economics departments all over the country and did what Calgaard challenged him to do. Throughout the rest of his tenure, he helped build the economics collection in the library and played a significant role in attracting other equally-distinguished faculty to the department.

In addition to his numerous academic books and publications, the creative and clever anti-trust expert also has enjoyed acclaim as a writer of murder mysteries. In collaboration with his colleague Kenneth G. Elzinga from the University of Virginia and under the pseudonym Marshall Jevons, Breit has published three novels, in which the protagonists apply economic theory to solve the crime. The idea caught on and now he says the concept is being imitated in other fields.

Breit retired from Trinity this May. As a former president of the Southern Economic

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Association and an internationally prominent author and lecturer, he was honored at retirement celebrations around the country. Perhaps the one that touched him most was the informal “tamalada” organized by his students to bid a fond farewell to their esteemed professor and friend. Their final tribute included an ice cream cake that featured an exact replica of the San Antonio magazine cover some years back that featured Breit as mystery writer in fedora and trench coat. The only mystery now is what Breit plans to do in retirement.