

PROFESSORS YOU LOVE

Making it through Madison

History professor Lee Congdon helped me survive as a freshman and became my friend

BY MICHAEL SZYMANSKI ('77)

I arrived on the campus of Madison College 39 years ago, with long hair and liberal ideas and the misguided belief that college would be easy. My first semester was a big wake-up call. I realized that, without a change in my academic effort, it would be my last. I found myself with no direction and seriously considered dropping out of college. Fortunately, someone was there to help guide me. I made it through my freshman year thanks to my history professor, Dr. Lee Congdon. I took his World History class my second semester and never looked back.

We were a strange combination from the outset. He was a conservative Midwestern professor with seriousness about teaching and the role of his students. I was a liberal East Coast kid with bad study habits, but lots of intellectual



Michael Szymanski writes about his favorite professor Lee Congdon.

curiosity. I had no idea what it took to survive college, let alone succeed.

But, we connected.

Dr. Congdon's demeanor and teaching style were engaging and intriguing. I found

myself spending more and more time in his office soaking up his wisdom about our class and life in general. It was after one of those meetings that I chose him as my academic adviser and our journey began. I came to him seeking knowledge and guidance and he listened and graciously took the time to help me understand how to excel. Dr. Congdon was always patient and kind. Along the way, I learned a great deal about friendship and life. I came to him as an unfocused young freshman, but he saw something in me and took me under his tutelage. He took an interest in me

and told me that he believed that I had what it took to be successful. He helped me navigate the rough waters of my freshman year.

Throughout my academic career, Dr. Congdon would invite me to his house for

The Lee Congdon Academic Scholarship

Professors You Love writer honors favorite professor with a scholarship

BY PAM BROCK

All who wander are not lost," quotes JMU history alumnus Michael Szymanski ('77) about all his career moves. In fact, fast-paced change is the way of the world today. Szymanski is director of strategic accounts for Inter-Call in Chicago. And yet he has worked for a string of companies, including HP, Corio, IBM, Webex, Cisco and Unisfair in his 32-year career.

"People change jobs on the average of three times during their lives," says College of Arts and Letters Dean David Jeffrey, "and job changes are expected to become even more frequent in the future. A liberal arts education prepares students by training them in critical

thinking and writing skills that are valuable in any business."

"That's me! I've made a dozen job or position changes," says Szymanski, whose career trajectory has focused mainly on sales, marketing and consulting, and has taken some other interesting twists and turns, including the successful consulting business, Corporate Affairs in San Jose, Calif., with his wife, Beth.

"History studies in general make you think critically. If you know how to write well, speak well and present well, you will be successful. My education at JMU was helped me in all these things."

During JMU President Jonathan Alger's recent "Why Madison?" Listening Tour, alumni consistently echoed the importance

of the knowledge, insight, skills and flexibility gained through the liberal arts at Madison. Szymanski admits it helped him thrive. "My career goal – in addition to making a living – has always been to be challenged, but more importantly to work in a fun environment."

As is frequently the case, companies buy startups and other companies, and then after a year or so start to change the people and the culture of the original business and replace it with their own parent company culture. "That's often when I start looking for something new, and I've always landed on my feet, and I am able to do what I love," Szymanski says. "Life is too short to be stuck in a boring job."

To underscore Madison's role in his current success, he has established the Lee Congdon Academic Scholarship in history to honor his cherished professor, who mentored him and pushed him to

dinner with his family. No other professor had ever invited me to his or her home. We would sit and chat for hours. In the beginning, I must admit that I only understood some of the philosophical topics we discussed. But I knew that if I kept listening and kept reading, it would all be revealed.

What I remember most about Dr. Congdon was his warmth and concern for me. Underneath his, what some would call, aristocratic exterior, he had a real compassion for students who worked hard and challenged him. He was always there to praise me when I did well, and to challenge and encourage me when I didn't do so well.

Dr. Congdon shaped my attitude toward work, a lesson that has continued to bring me success. I remember a conversation we had when I told him that I had spent the weekend in the library studying. I was proud of myself. He asked me how much time I actually spent studying and how much time socializing. I told him that it was probably 50/50. He told me that library time was for studying. "You study for hours, you get a sip of water and you



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— MICHAEL SZYMANSKI ('77)

study for more hours." Although I personally did not think that anyone in their right mind could study like that, I understood his message. He was challenging me

to strive for more, to not accept mediocrity and to work harder. He taught me to take charge of my education; he encouraged me to think critically; and he taught me to think for myself and be self-confident in everything I do.

After graduation, Dr. Congdon and his family welcomed me with open arms whenever I returned to visit Harrisonburg. We would have dinner and continue those late-night chats about the world, family and friends. I miss those times. Fortunately he visited me in California and I had the opportunity to introduce him to my children. I think they were impressed by the fact that I actually knew a college professor and the professor had nice things to say about me!

Dr. Congdon has written many books, and I have read them all. I am probably one of only a select few who owns a complete, autographed set of his books. He remains a mentor, a father figure, a role model and friend to me, my wife and my children. Dr. Congdon was a major influence in my life, always there for me, both academically and personally. m

About the Professor Professor Emeritus of History Lee W. Congdon began his career at JMU in 1972. He retired in 2005, but still teaches part time. A widely published and internationally respected scholar, Congdon has taught courses in world and modern European history. Despite a heavy teaching load prior to retirement, Congdon pursued research and writing endeavors and completed extensive research on the Hungarian intellectuals of the 19th century.

About the Author Michael Szymanski ('77) is a partner with Corporate Affairs in San Jose, Calif. The history and communication double major also earned a master's in political science from Ohio State University and a juris doctor from Lincoln University. He and his wife, Beth, have two children, Rachel and Brian. Below, learn more about Szymanski's scholarship gift to honor JMU history professor, Lee W. Congdon.

make the most of his Madison education. President Alger invited Szymanski and Congdon back to campus during Madison Week in March 2013 to highlight their transformational relationship during both the Stewardship Luncheon and Alger's inaugural speech.

"Whether they have been out 50 years, 25 years or five years," the president said during Madison Week, "alumni report a critical consistent point: Relationships between caring, world-class professors and their students are at the core of the Madison Experience. These relationships are life-changing. Often, they last a lifetime."

At the luncheon, the president pointed to Szymanski. The former history student then turned to Congdon and said, "Years from now, when we are old and gray — some of us more gray than others — a student will be awarded the Lee Congdon Academic Scholarship. Honestly, that stu-

dent will have no idea who Dr. Congdon or I am, but hopefully they will understand what Dr. Congdon meant to me and what Madison meant to me and how I wanted to give back to my university.

Szymanski encourages other alumni to reflect on the value of their Madison education and make a gift to JMU. "Every alum has a professor who made a difference in their life," he says. "At Madison this is the rule, not the exception. I know that because, after I left Madison, I attended two other universities and earned additional degrees. I never felt the love there that I felt here. When we make a gift to JMU, we're making a difference in someone's life. We're helping ensure that these life-changing, educational relationships continue at JMU. It's important to me to make sure that other students have the same opportunity that I had." m

*Hear more from Michael Szymanski ('77) at www.jmu.edu/donors and from

other 2013 Stewardship Luncheon presenters, including President Jonathan Alger, Nick Langridge ('00, '07M), Leslie Gilliam ('82), Emya Lee ('14) and Robin Goodman ('83). And read the Professors You Love article above.

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