

**Ernest A. Becker**

1914-1998

DEAN OF STUDENTS AND PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY, EMERITUS

Ernest A. Becker was the founding Dean of Students at what was then known as Orange County State College. He had served founding President William B. Langsdorf at Pasadena City College as dean of students and was one of the first administrators named in 1959 by Langsdorf for the new college, later renamed California State College, Fullerton.

Dr. Becker, or Ernie as he was known by his colleagues, was a key player in the early days of the institution. When the college was first housed in an unused portion of Fullerton High School, Ernie typed the first catalog of courses and had it duplicated for distribution to the first entering class of students. As adviser to the first student newspaper and to the first student body government, he suggested in jest, that an elephant racing club be established at the college. His joke caught fire when the students decided to do just that and the OCSC Elephant Racing Club was formed. One thing led to another and in 1962, the first Intercollegiate Elephant Race was held on campus. A number of elephants were obtained from a Hollywood back lot. College students from universities and colleges in California and some from across the nation sent in entries. At starting time, there were 15 entries, each representing a collegiate institution. Nearly ten thousand spectators were on hand and over 80 newspaper reporters. The first winning entry was ridden by the student editor of the Harvard Crimson newspaper! Reports were carried by national press agencies, putting little OCSC on the map. Ernie's joke was a prime example of his sense of humor. When his eyes would twinkle, you knew that Ernie had a good one to share.

Ernie began his professional career as a journalist, working at one time for *The Christian Science Monitor* and other news organizations. Later he obtained a graduate degree in Divinity and eventually a doctorate in Higher Education at the University of Southern California.

Ernie was devoted to his wife of many years, Helen. Helen was the secretary to Reinhold Niebuhr with whom Ernie interned after graduation from Amherst. In his years at Fullerton, Ernie preferred to take his daily lunches at his home near the campus with Helen at which time he discussed the work issues he was addressing. Helen enjoyed those reports and time she could

spend with Ernie. They had two sons.

For those of us who worked closely with Dean Becker through the last half of the decade of the 1960's, Ernie was the leader of the team building what we hoped would be an excellent program of student support services at the College. The student health center, counseling center, financial aid office, admission and records offices, and even an on-campus housing program featuring a pair of dormitories situated across Nutwood Avenue were among those services established. We were very proud of what we had built for the students of the College, and later, the University.

Ernie was at the center of this process. He was a kind of father figure for those of us who were younger. He seemed to delight in our initiatives and we looked forward to the weekly meetings of "Deans and Directors" in the Dean of Students conference room. We formed a tight bond which extended from the professional to the social and personal. Ernie had been a Congregational minister earlier in his life and his style was somewhat pastoral. But it was not stodgy or overly formal. On occasion, he would call us on the phone on a late Friday afternoon and suggest we meet for a "special D & D meeting" at the local Placentia pub --- far enough from campus to insure that we would not be a "bad influence" on our students.

In recognition of Dr. Becker's leadership abilities and his record at Fullerton, he was appointed statewide Dean of Students to assist in the development of the many other young institutions making up the California State University system. He served two years in that role, from 1967 to 1969, which were challenging due to rapid expansion of the CSU System just as the issues of student protest focused on the university and the community, the war in Vietnam, the reaction by conservative elements of the communities, and administrative decrees issued by the new Governor of California, Ronald Reagan. The Chancellor felt the system required an experienced professional to serve as the state-wide Dean of Students in what many recognized to be a "temporary state of emergency."

Ernie had a deep commitment to the value of civility toward and respect for others. This too follows from his ministerial background. During the period of anti-Vietnam protests on campus, he seemed to have difficulty believing that student protestors could behave so badly toward other students, faculty and administrators. He believed that respect was due to even

those with whom you disagreed. What he saw happening around him during that period of protests in 1969-70 must have been difficult for him to accept. First, much of his professional experience had been on traditional residential campuses and Fullerton, particularly was almost a total commuter institution. Secondly, the diversity of students and young faculty with limited experience in higher education institutions was a difficult adjustment for Ernie. He no doubt was deeply hurt when, near the end of the protests, Acting President Donald Shields asked him to step down as Dean of Students. But always a team player and a gentleman, Ernie accepted his new responsibility as Director of the Career Placement Center, a position he held until his retirement in 1977.

One other major event occurred before his retirement which was a dreadful blow to Ernie, that of the death of his son, Stephen, in the 1976 campus shooting that occurred in the University Library. Seven people were slain in this random shooting including several staff members and one founding faculty member, Seth Fessenden. Reports indicated that Stephen had confronted the deranged shooter and tried to disarm him but was shot and killed in the process. This was a major blow for Ernie. For many years afterward, he testified at parole hearings against the release of the shooter. One can only guess the effect this event may have had on Ernie's personal philosophy of civility and respect for others. But there is no doubt that he must have experienced a bittersweet pride in his son as Stephen tried to end the violence by putting his own life on the line.

Ernest Becker was a highly respected educator and administrator, both on campus and off. He led the effort to create a quality student affairs and services program for the institution. He hired the initial administrators who developed the different components of that program. He built a team that worked together to meet the needs of the student body and of the faculty as they dealt with the problems and concerns presented by those students. He served the university system for two years as its statewide Dean of Students. Those of us who worked directly with Ernie in those early days are proud to have been a part of his team. We carry with us fond memories of him and of the times when we worked together to build the student affairs program at Cal State Fullerton.

Submitted by:  
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