

the dean's corner

DACUS LIBRARY / WINTHROP UNIVERSITY / NOVEMBER 2002 / NUMBER 23

Chepesiuk bids farewell

Over the last nearly three decades, the Dacus Archives have been in the capable hands of Ron Chepesiuk. Ron announced his retirement plans earlier this past summer—but only his retirement from Winthrop, not from active duty. Twenty-eight years seemed like a long time to us, so recently the Dean's Corner sat down with Ron to ask him about his career. We learned a great deal and thought it interesting enough to share with you. Thanks for the 28 years, Ron. Adieu!

DC: Let's start with the prestigious Fulbright award in journalism. You're going to Bangladesh, the first person in two decades to receive the journalism award. Tell us more about the award and what you hope to accomplish. Is this a fitting capstone to your career?

Ron Chepesiuk: I'm a very practical person, so I surveyed... to see where the journalism awards were. Pakistan was offering investigative journalism in news writing. So I applied. Then Sept. 11 came along. Then Daniel Pearl was murdered. Fulbright gave me three options: Drop out and reapply next year, wait a year or choose another country. Egypt and Bangladesh interested me, but Egypt was really slow and Bangladesh got on it right away. They have a new program that they started in '95 at the University of

Chittagong, and they thought my background would be helpful. I thought it would be a good way to launch a new career.

DC: Is Bangladesh dangerous? It shares a border with Pakistan.

Ron: There are rumors of Bangladesh being a haven for Al-Qaeda. But I've received e-mails from the University of Chittagong faculty saying that is sensational journalism. My research will be on "Globalization and Its Discontent, the Impact on the American Dream: Myth and Reality." They're very excited about the topic and so am I.

DC: Your career at Dacus spans nearly 30 years, filled with awards and honors. Can you distill your career into a dozen or a half dozen peaks or important points?

Ron: The biggest "award" was actually being able to run the archives. It gives me great joy knowing that the collections, the programs that I started here, will still be able to go on. Probably the biggest award, aside from the Fulbright, was winning the Humphry Award from OCLC, the international library service award.

DC: How did you build the Dacus Archives?

Ron: I came here as a reference librarian and archivist—half time each. There was a lot of stuff here, but nothing had really

been done. My predecessor had a photographic memory and was very helpful by identifying thousands of photographs, an incalculable contribution. We developed a theme—a woman's history—because of Winthrop's past, and public programming, because the records by themselves don't mean anything unless you publicize them, show how they can be used and promote them. I started to develop some programs such as Archives in the Schools. Pete Pepinsky actually launched my writing career by suggesting that I write a column on South Carolina history. At that time, I'd published one article.

The biggest "award" was actually being able to run the archives. It gives me great joy knowing that the collections, the programs that I started here, will still be able to go on.

I did a couple of practice columns. They weren't great, but they were okay. I recruited Louise Pettus, an historian here, and we did this column for several years. At one time we had 80 newspapers picking it up, either regularly or periodically. It was great discipline for me in terms of writing. Later on I became associated with the *American Libraries*. That was another award—being a contributing editor to them for five years. They're the top

magazine in librarianship. Today, we now have two million items in the Archives, probably more.

DC: You've interviewed a number of very important folks. Who was the most interesting?

Ron: There are several people for different reasons. I did a book on the sixties radicals, and I interviewed Abbie Hoffman six months before he died. It was quite interesting to see him.

I interviewed Jerry Adams when nobody knew who he was unless you were familiar with Northern Ireland politics. I remember asking him about a shipment of guns and explosives that the British intercepted coming from Libya. He sort of stumbled and gave me a look that said, "Change the conversation."

Dave Barry is another whom I've interviewed—twice. He's as funny in person as he is in print.

Yassar Arafat was quite interesting because of the shock of seeing this frail man, 70 years old, trembling with—I think—Parkinson's disease and knowing that if he left, this whole place could change dramatically.

Also, interviewing Andres Pastrana, the president of Colombia, was an enervating experience. About five months later he was kidnaped by Pablo Escobar.

DC: You are working on a critically

important book about the drug war for Praeger. What can you tell us about this?

Ron: That's the book I wanted to do. I've been waiting for someone else to do it. I thought this would be a good transition book, mainly because it's a book about the Cali cartel, which is based in the city of Cali, and the drug trafficking mafia that operated primarily in the early seventies to about 1995, until it was taken down by law enforcement. So far, it sounds like any other group of criminals. The Cali cartel was actually quite different from your regular thugs. They were very sophisticated. They provided a business approach to drug trafficking and to criminality.

It's a great story; it's not just significant in terms of what the cartel did. The title is *Silver Lead: The Story of the Cali Cartel and the Greatest Take-Down in Law Enforcement History*. I've interviewed close to 100 people for the project, tracing the story from the beginning of the cocaine trade when it became really big in the early seventies up until the mid-nineties when the Cali cartel became a multinational enterprise.

The Cali cartel realized that killing cops wasn't the way to do it. When they were hunting Pablo Escobar in the late 1980s, he put a bounty on every cop's head in Colombia. The Cali cartel went out and built them a police station.

There are a lot of lessons to be learned about the war on terrorism. One of the lessons, in terrorist investigations, is you can't go after the head, just solely the head, although it makes for good press headlines. You've got to attack the

organization. Every aspect of it. While there is risk, I think there is merit to that strategy. The other big lesson on the war on terrorism is the fact that federal agencies have an historical tendency not to cooperate. This will be a timely book, I hope.

DC: Has the Cali cartel been replaced?

Ron: Oh, yes. Now you have what are called *cartelitos*, baby cartels, mom and pop operations where you'll get two or four people coming together to make a drug deal.

I'm hoping this book will launch me into more research, probably into the connection between drugs and terrorism because there is a huge connection there. Bangladesh is a conduit for drugs. It's near Burma, which is part of the Golden Triangle. Living in Bangladesh, I'm pretty sure I'll have material for another book.

DC: You have written thousands of articles and published a dozen and a half books. Do you have favorites among them?

Ron: Not many people get a chance to do an encyclopedia, and I did an encyclopedia on the war on drugs in 1999.

DC: It must have been good background for your forthcoming book.

Ron: Yes, but what I really want to do is move towards books with more commercial appeal. Essentially, there isn't much money writing academic books; there is much more money in writing magazine articles and the short stuff. The prestige and the

glory, of course, is in the books. Everybody has a desire to do books. In the future I will be looking to pick my shots in doing a book that will give me a big enough advance so that I can spend more time on it. I have to do a lot of the short stuff to survive.

DC: If you were giving advice to a new librarian or someone who wanted to enter Archives, what advice would you give him or her?

Ron: That's a very good question because there is a lot of debate about whether we have a future or not. I don't want to sound negative. Too many librarians get into the profession for all of the wrong reasons. They think it's a very comfortable profession. Those are the wrong reasons for getting into the library profession. It's an exciting profession, but you have to keep your mind open and be willing to take on new challenges as they arise and to grow. Again, I would say keep an open mind, look for opportunities, especially opportunities that add something to the profession. I've enjoyed it here. It's been a nice place to work. If you let it, it can become too comfortable. Don't get into that mode because you are selling your profession short, and you are selling yourself short.

DC: Thank you very much.

For more information, see <http://www.winthrop.edu/dacus>. Click on "about Dacus," then "Library Publications," and "Dacus Focus" or "Dean's Corner."

the dean's corner

DACUS LIBRARY / WINTHROP UNIVERSITY / ROCK HILL, SC 29733
