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Hard work makes university dream a reality

by Marilyn Thomas
(4th in a series)

The challenge of making dreams reality is invigorating, frenetic and engaging.

It was no different for the organizers of GSU, says William Engbretson, the university's first president.

In 1969, Engbretson's first challenge was finding a home for his new university.

"When I came," he said, "I didn't have a secretary. I didn't have a typewriter, except the little portable one I'd used for years."

But Engbretson did have a friend in Nathan Manilow, founder and developer of the village of Park Forest whose next project was developing Park Forest South where the university campus would eventually find a permanent home.

"Mr. Manilow said, 'I will give you an office.' So my first office was really the outer office in the Park Forest Plaza," the president remembered.

Eventually, Engbretson rented office space above Sun Drugs in the Park Forest Plaza. He then hired six staff people to help him organize the university. Within months, the university's staff was multiplying, said BOG Universities Chancellor Thomas Layzell, one of the six founding employees.

The staff believed it had until 1973 to plan this new, innovative university before accepting the first students. Then the state board of higher education gave President Engbretson a revised date. The university would be opened in September, 1971.

Things moved into high gear, remembered Professor David Crispin of the Division of Psychology and Counseling. "We had about a year to just sit and plan, write curriculum, read books, plan schedules... sometimes we'd work 60-80 hours a week. It was very stressful; very exciting."

But for some people, this new university was too radical. Chancellor Layzell recalled one such meeting. "Faculty were sitting around talking about the open, humane and innovative, unique kinds of things we were going to be doing and I can remember the students asking questions like: 'How many hours do I have to take for a major in accounting?' We didn't talk about anything like that," he said.

It didn't matter. GSU staff had dreams --- big dreams --- of a university designed for students, not a bureaucracy. They were going to make this university happen, and they were going to make it work.

President Bill Engbretson's deadline was fast approaching. Although he had land on which he to build a university, he couldn't get it constructed in a year. He went back to his friend, Manilow, who agreed to lease the university warehouse space in the Park Forest South industrial park. It wasn't the perfect home, but it would do. The

opening day excitement was building as staff scurried around for weeks in preparation.

Then it happened, said

Crispin. "We opened... ahead of time in that warehouse. I remember our first class. It was a night class. I was team teaching. We

welcomed the students and sort of celebrated... we stood up and clapped or something. It was very exciting."

That first eight-week session, GSU had 535 students enrolled in its four colleges.

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