

Dr. Hugh Popenoe Memorial Service¹

Kate Semerad²

I am privileged to speak today for our dear friend and colleague Dr. Hugh Popenoe.

Like snowflakes, each of us is unique in our own way. But some of us stand out in uniqueness and Hugh Popenoe was certainly a standout in the category of being unique.

He was born not far from here, in Tela, Honduras. His wonderfully talented and intelligent mother died when he was only 3, and he and his sisters were sent to live with relatives in the United States for the next 10 years. When he was 13, he came back to Honduras to live with his father, Wilson Popenoe, who was then just creating Zamorano.

Some years ago when I asked Hugh about his father, he told me that as a young lad he loved to go horseback riding with him. He said at first he rode bare back but soon he began begging his father for a saddle of his own. Now Dr. Popenoe had a keen sense of how to properly challenge young people, so he told Hugh that he would get him a new saddle if he could learn all of Shakespeare's sonnets by heart. I doubt most of you here today know that Hugh Popenoe could recite Shakespeare's sonnets, but he could, and he did, and he got his saddle.

Perhaps as a result of learning the sonnets, Hugh had a life long love for reading poetry. He also loved music - favoring Lawrence Welk. He liked to sit on the back porch at his ranch house singing or playing his harmonica with his favorite border collie howling by his side in accompaniment.

There are many more surprising facts about Hugh that I **discovered earlier** this week when talking with

Betty Haeseker, Hugh's long time partner and friend. I don't think Hugh would mind if I shared a few of these stories with you tonight.

When Hugh was eighteen and it was time for him to go to college, at first he resisted, relenting only when he discovered that the Honduran army was about to draft him. Then, quickly, with his father's help, they crafted a high school diploma – as he didn't have one – out of an old Zamorano certificate. Then, with Archie Carr's assistance they sent Hugh's application to UC Davis where he was accepted. It was at UC Davis where he learned to love learning and after completing four years, he opted to sign up for an extra year of courses.

We all know that Hugh was not a flashy person. He chose to live very simply. He never bought a new car, preferring ones he considered "broken in". However he did believe in quality, so his last car was a 1979 Mercedes Benz. Betty told me that Hugh drove the car before this Mercedes for so long that his mechanic finally had to weld a new floor in the car to prevent Hugh from dropping through onto the road.

As we know, Hugh spent his career teaching at the University of Florida. And for 40 years he lived in an apartment near the University campus - so he could go home for lunch and perhaps take a short nap. But on holidays and weekends, he and Betty lived in an historic old schoolhouse on the ranch that he was restoring. The schoolhouse was very primitive. It had no screens and no running water. But Hugh was very much at home in this wilderness and would go off for days at a time, sleeping in the swales where his herd of water buffalo roamed.

¹ Gardner Chapel, Zamorano University, November 11, 2011.

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In addition to the water buffalo, he was famous for, Hugh loved dogs too and there were always three or four of them lazing about. Although, as with his cars, his dogs were never new - they were either picked up at an animal shelter or they just wandered in the door one day and decided to stay.

Over his life, Hugh returned to Zamorano often and was a Trustee here for over 41 years, serving a term as Board Chairman and surviving the diverse personalities and tensions that have always been a part of the Zamorano Board's deliberations.

As a Trustee, Hugh could always be depended on to argue for the preservation of the best of Zamorano's proud traditions. But he could also be depended on to quickly grasp the promise of a new idea and the need for a necessary change that could propel this University toward a more promising future.

For some very critical years, Hugh Chaired the Board's Academic Committee. This was at a time when Zamorano was transitioning from its original 3-year program to its current 4×4 . This was a difficult and demanding time, yet Hugh never lost his temper or his unique sense of humor. During one tense meeting with Dr. Antonio Flores, the Academic Dean and primary architect of the 4×4 curriculum, Hugh sought to encourage Antonio by saying that he understood that making massive curriculum changes while at the same time trying to conduct a normal academic year was "... like trying to change the fan belt on your car with the engine running."

Hugh was tireless in working for Zamorano in other ways as well: He championed our students here and at the University of Florida; He brought countless colleagues from Florida to share expertise; He cajoled his sister, Dr. Marion Popenoe de Hatch, to host

numerous Zamorano groups at their Casa Popenoe in Guatemala; and, in the past few years he donated many pieces of his Latin American art collection to Zamorano so that it could be auctioned off to support student scholarships.

Dr. Francille M. Firebaugh's remarks earlier enumerated many of the achievements, recognitions and high honors Hugh received nationally and internationally. His contributions were clearly exceptional. Yet Hugh came here, to this small university campus in Central America, and sat amongst us as a humble man. There was no pretense or boasting. He just brought his quiet, thoughtful, reassuring presence.

Hugh will be missed by so many in so many different ways.

Personally, I will most miss his good company over an evening glass of wine after a day of hard fought battles at the Board table. We would sit with our feet up on the porch of the Casa Popenoe and wax philosophically about life. And always, in these conversations, we talked about the importance of using our lives for something bigger than ourselves.

We agreed, as I think everyone here tonight agrees, that our work at Zamorano has been that "something bigger than ourselves" and that our lives have been made vastly more meaningful by our being able to be a part of this very special institution.

God speed Hugh! You lived your life well. You made a real difference, and the world is a better place because you were in it!

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