

Former A&M professor still enjoys 'radical' ideas

By Clark Miller
Reporter

Dr. Rod O'Connor says he was considered the first radical at Berkeley.

The 52-year-old teacher-inventor, surrounded by a cloud of cigarette smoke, remembers the mid-1950s and his days as a student at the University of California at Berkeley — known as a hotbed of radicalism in the 1960s.

"They threatened to expel me because I signed a petition that was being passed by Linus Pauling (who received two Nobel Prizes in chemistry) to stop testing nuclear weapons in the open atmosphere," says O'Connor, looking about as radical as grandma's apple pie.

"Ten years later, Berkeley would have been glad to have radicals that were no worse than me," he says from behind his cluttered desk.

O'Connor directed the first-year chemistry program at Texas A&M from 1973 to 1983 and taught organic chemistry at A&M from 1983 to 1986.

It was O'Connor's love of students that caused him to leave A&M.

"I didn't have a difference of opinion with the University, it was people who called themselves representatives of the University," O'Connor says. "They wanted me to do things with my job that I considered against the best interest of the students."

"Most of the trouble I've gotten into was because an administrator — who I was 10 times as smart as — tried to tell me what to do," the grizzled veteran of faculty wars says, "and when I tried to say 'Yes sir,' it came out, 'Stick it in your ear.'"

One conflict that arose out of O'Connor's struggle to uphold the students' interests, he says, was the administration's decision to keep students from attending the chemistry lecture section they wanted to attend rather than the one to which they were assigned.

The other conflict was the administration's decision to prohibit O'Connor from selecting the faculty he wanted for the program.

That, he says, would have an adverse effect on the students.

"I thought it was a good idea to let the students shop around," he says.

O'Connor says students should be allowed to find a teacher on their wavelength.

The administration disagreed and O'Connor now spends his time working at Texas ROMEC, a com-



Dr. Rod O'Connor shows off a poster of some of his products which landed him a contract with 13 nations.

pany that researches and develops his inventions.

O'Connor started Texas ROMEC in 1980 and spread his time between his company and A&M until he resigned from A&M in December 1986.

O'Connor has been married for 31 years and he and his wife have four children — two sons and two daughters.

"I have four kids who think there's no school but A&M," he says. "I have one senior, one graduate, one freshman and one who's been in and out a couple of times."

That's one reason O'Connor, who grew up in Missouri and went to college in California and Colorado, has stayed in College Station. Other reasons are his several friends on the faculty of A&M — many who serve as consultants for his company — and his love for teaching.

"I have available some of the best advisers in the world," he says.

"I have sort of a dream that a bunch of people up at A&M would remove their heads from their present location and ask me to come back and teach freshman chemistry," he says, as he drops a half-smoked cigarette into an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes.

There are two simple reasons for only smoking half a cigarette, he says — one is that he gets less tar and the other is that if he runs out while he's working late, he can always grab one from the ashtray.

O'Connor is a self-confessed workaholic (14 hours a day and six-and-a-half days a week). He hasn't taken a vacation in more than two years and proudly admits he's an "egotistical s.o.b."

And, O'Connor explains, he has a very patient wife.

When he's not working, O'Connor says he likes working crossword puzzles, taking his wife for walks in the mountains and composing music. He says he writes both lyrics and melody and has copyrights on three songs.

O'Connor has never been one to do things the hard way, as he proved when he took a test covering the Missouri Constitution that he, as a student, had to pass to graduate from high school.

"There were a lot of easy questions so almost everybody could pass, but there were also a lot of piddly questions so none could do very good," he says. "It was a four-hour multiple choice exam with a machine-graded answer page printed

on the front and back of a piece of paper. I was sitting by the window when I took the test.

"I knew quite a bit of the answers, but nowhere near all of them. When I checked my paper when I finished, the light from the window showed that many of the answers lined up, so I figured they must match to make grading faster. So if I knew I had the right answer on one side, I put the matching answer on the other side.

"I got the first, and as far as I know the only, 100 percent on that test."

O'Connor says he never told his teacher why he did so well because she was so proud of the great job she had done teaching.

A good way to sum up O'Connor is by the note he gave the current dean of science, Dr. John P. Fackler, when he arrived at A&M.

Fackler asked faculty members to write something about themselves to help him get acquainted.

O'Connor says he wrote, "I'm fairly innovative, like to work hard, love students, admire anyone who does a good job of teaching or research and have absolutely zero respect for any administrative title."

O'Connor, cats share honors in invention of unique flea comb

By Clark Miller
Reporter

Two 20-pound cats and a former Texas A&M professor are responsible for an innovative liquid-dispensing flea comb that has been taking the itch out of animals since 1984.

Dr. Rod O'Connor, A&M director of freshman chemistry from 1973-1983, said he came up with the idea in 1982 after a futile attempt to spray his combative cats for fleas.

"The cats are co-inventors," says O'Connor, chief executive and founder of a College Station company, Texas ROMEC.

The comb, sold in area pet-supply stores as the "d'flea comb," works on the same principle as a felt-tip pen.

The handle of the comb has a reservoir of felt saturated with a liquid insecticide.

The comb has a single row of nylon teeth (like felt-tip pens) that extend into the reservoir and draw the liquid to the end of the teeth.

The insecticide is then applied directly to the pet's skin and hair roots by brushing the animal with the comb, O'Connor says.

While O'Connor's comb has proved to be an effective way to kill fleas, the national Centers for Disease Control have found another use for it in 1986 — it helped prove pets were capable of carrying the bubonic plague.

The NCDC believed pets were responsible for spreading the plague at an Indian reservation in New Mexico, but it was having a hard time verifying its assumption.

"It used to be thought that the plague was only spread by wild animals like rats and ground squirrels," O'Connor says.

Wild animals are tested after they are poisoned and the fleas are picked off their bodies, but the same method is understandably not popular for testing pets.

O'Connor's combs were used after the NCDC found it impossible to use a spray or dip on the skittish pets that were running around the reservation.

"Not only did the half-wild dogs

stand still for the combs," O'Connor says, "they followed the guys from the NCDC around to get brushed again."

Fleas from the pets that were tested proved the pets were carriers of the plague.

O'Connor began devoting all his time to his company, Texas ROMEC, which he started in 1980 as a mechanism for developing his inventions, after resigning from A&M teaching position in 1986.

The combs, he says, have been one of his biggest successes.

"The combs came out in 1984 and sold \$20,000 in six states," O'Connor says. "In 1986, they were sold in states for \$340,000."

"They're now selling in 22 foreign countries and we expect \$2.5 million in 1987," he says.

The combs are selling in France, Germany, Great Britain, France, Australia and Canada.

The flea comb also has spawned a line of related inventions by O'Connor.

A human delousing comb is the best marketed through a health-supply catalog, he says.

"There were 30 million cases of head lice in humans in '86," O'Connor says.

Also being field-tested is a comb that will kill and strip off fleas from their eggs from horses.

A carpet brush for killing fleas also is being developed, he says.

"You use a lot less liquid and you don't have a risk of inhaling the mist," O'Connor says, describing advantages of the carpet brush.

"You don't end up with a wet carpet," he says.

A liquid-dispensing grooming brush for pets and a fly repellent for large animals also are planned releases by O'Connor and his company.

O'Connor says the advantages of his liquid-dispensing comb over conventional ways of killing fleas is that the comb is less expensive because the liquid is strategically placed where the fleas are, and less liquid is used.

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