

Professors: More than physical likeness

Gillette brothers make A&M economic classes different, stimulating

By Kelly S. Brown
Reporter

Three offices away from each other on the fourth floor of Harrington Tower are two Texas A&M economics teachers. Both have brown hair, blue eyes and high expectations of their students. One has a mustache; the other wears glasses.

The differences between the two are few, and the similarities seem unending. If at first glance a person doesn't notice that they are identical twin brothers, the connection becomes unmistakable after hearing their Virginian dialect.

Dr. J. Robert Gillette and Dr. Lynn G. Gillette are known by students who take their economics classes as high-gear, dynamic teachers who will send cold shivers up and down an unprepared student's back.

One day in class Lynn asks a question about excessive monetary growth. Eleven hands immediately shoot into the air. They know class participation is 10 percent of their grade and they are required to earn it.

He points to a girl he called on 15 minutes before, to whom he promised a second chance after she could not answer a previous question. She still has her head down and is flipping through her notes in the back of the room when he says, "Go... Go... Take it," pointing at her.

Silence lingers for a few seconds before she quietly answers, "Inflation?"

Lynn imitates her voice. The students laugh. He stops pacing and looks up at his students.

"Low self-esteem is the fault of your parents," he says. "If you are against yourself how can anyone help you? You have to do this for yourselves and no one else."

He shifts directly back into class and calls on an eager student who answers quickly.

Lynn replies, "Whoa... Wow... No. Good incorrect answer. I wish I could teach more by having people say things wrong, so I could teach from that."

He crosses the front of the room, his eyes focused on the ground, with one hand in his pocket and the other pointing at another student as he says, "Take it, big guy."

This student gets the right answer.

"Good-good-good," Lynn says as he turns quickly to the next question.

Freshman political science major Danica Milios has had both Bob and Lynn for economics classes.

"Both Dr. Bob Gillette and Dr. Lynn Gillette push their students very hard," she says. "I can't say which is a better teacher because they are both effective, talented teachers. There is a slight difference in the way they teach, but the results are the same."

Jana Shell, a sophomore environmental design major, was in Bob's introductory economics class last spring.

"I think he is a well-reasoned and

electric teacher," she says. "His examples in class are not the boring humdrum we usually hear from teachers, but then again, he's not the usual teacher. He uses anecdotes in class that get the point across, relate to us and will make us laugh."

"He was discussing the search behavior of employers and employees in labor markets and he explained it like searching for a date, with the costs and benefits involved, and we could relate to that."

Lynn says he and his brother are serious about their teaching.

"Both Bob and I reveal our personalities in class," he says, "which either attracts some people or turns some people off, but they do get some feel for who we are. We are organized, take class very seriously and are extremely concerned with what the students learn."

Thomas Brown, a senior economics major, was one of Bob's students last year.

"Dr. (Bob) Gillette is energizing in class," Brown says. "He paces back and forth, one hand in his pocket and the other in the air emphasizing the words that shoot from his mouth to the back of the room. His shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, and he's ready to delve into our minds to pull out what we know."

"Sometimes I think he expects too much of his students and it's an unrealistic expectation."

Bob says the love he and his brother have for economics comes through in the classroom.

"I don't think Lynn or I restrict ourselves in class," Bob says, "so our passion for life or our passion for economics will come through, and that's sort of a motivational factor. We are more than lecturers, we are teachers. When I teach, I let my passions show. In a sense I'm performing, but not performing to the degree of letting my love for it slide."

Never sitting still, Bob continues.

"It's like if you're telling someone about a baseball game and you get all excited about it when you tell them about how your team won," he says. "Lynn and I are not afraid to occasionally show the students a little of who we are, as opposed to just pure intellect."

Lynn and Bob teach according to the Socratic method — always asking questions. They say they find it boring just to present class material without student participation.

Lynn says, "If you ask questions but you are a bit 'wimpish,' then class doesn't move quick enough and not as much is covered."

Derek Moore, a freshman economics major who took Lynn's classes for two semesters, says, "He'd refer to himself as a 'once-undergraduate moron' and call us that... or worse. But he can do that and get away with it. He's in touch with his students. He'd take the subject to our level, take us through our level and boost us up to a higher level each day. It's incredible; I don't know where he gets it."

Bob and Lynn, 34, grew up in Vir-

ginia farming country with their older sister and parents.

When they weren't in school they usually could be found on the baseball field. Both had serious goals of becoming professional baseball players.

Motivating them to achieve their goals was their father, who was a football and baseball coach as well as a teacher and principal.

Lynn says, "Our father didn't put us in neutral, he put us in drive, steered us and gave us goals."

Bob says, "The fact our goals were the same early on is not surprising, given that we are identical twins."

In college, both were on the Dean's List and lettered in intercollegiate baseball. They agree that they never have competed to be better than the other.

Lynn says, "When it came time to choose a college we made independent decisions on where we were going to go. We both decided on the University of Richmond, basically because of the baseball program."

"We made independent decisions on what fraternity to join our first year and ended up in the same one. Majoring in economics was an independent decision as well."

"Grad school was also an independent decision, and in 1975 Bob came to Texas A&M, whereas I went to the University of Kentucky for one year then transferred here in 1976 because Bob was learning more here, and the quality of grad programs was much better. The fact that we are both economics teachers at the same school was never planned," says Lynn.

After attaining his Ph.D. in economics at A&M in 1981, Lynn taught as a visiting professor at Southern Methodist University. During his first semester there, he was selected by the students as one of the top 10 teachers — out of the 450 faculty members — for teaching excellence.

Lynn also received excellent teaching evaluations at the University of Texas at Austin, where he taught from 1981 until 1985.

"I would rather be at A&M than at 't.u.' by leaps and bounds," Lynn says. "I got a little tired of dealing with the dragworms day in and day out; it got a little old. The average student at A&M seems to have a little more pressure from their parents, more of a work ethic."

Lynn left the University of Texas to serve as assistant vice president for academic affairs at James Madison University in Virginia. After one year, he returned to A&M as a visiting assistant professor.

"It gets hard when you are told and you believe that you're very good at something, just to walk away from it," he says. "So I had trouble leaving teaching."

Lynn says he doesn't believe that a career in academics necessarily means little money. He also could write textbooks and consult, he says, although he does neither now because of time limitations.



Economics professors Bob Gillette and Lynn Gillette

After Bob taught economics at Washington State University for six months in 1980, he moved back to Texas and worked as the assistant director for litigative economics at RRC Inc. in Bryan.

He received his Ph.D. in 1986 and began teaching at A&M since. Like his brother, Bob also has received outstanding teacher evaluations.

"I think students should raise expectations of themselves," Bob says. "It's not OK just to be OK. Mediocore with anything is not OK. I have to expect from them what they would not. It's what a motivating general would do. Teachers are part motivators. Sitting in class, I have to show students to be all they can be educationally."

Lynn says, "An undergraduate who has had Bob or me might say, 'Yes, he will embarrass you. Yes, it is intimidating, but he makes you learn. Class is exciting and you will make better grades.' That's what I want."

Brian Harris, a sophomore aerospace engineering major, says he respects Lynn.

"If you're against yourself, he is against you," Harris says. "He is a sharp, hard-charging guy, but I don't think he understands why all students can't be like him and give 100 percent to everything."

Bob says he thinks Lynn is a more demanding teacher than he.

"I think Lynn is more intimidating than I am," Bob says. "Lynn is more demanding and that's good for me. He keeps reminding me — am I asking enough of my students? Of myself?"

Lynn agrees that he has a harder edge.

"Bob is not quite as hard," Lynn says. "Not as quick to cut someone off, be rude, if necessary, or embarrass someone as I would."

Lynn pointed out another difference.

"Bob is more dedicated to the church than I am, although we are both Christians, but other than that there are not many differences when comparing us to anyone else in the world," he says.

Bob says he and Lynn could be closer but that their families are the most important things in their lives now.

"As an economist, theoretically, I can truly come up with some negative factors of being a twin, but the net positive benefits are huge," Bob says. "It is the second-biggest blessing after my wife, Susanne."

Bob was married last spring, and Lynn has been married since his senior year in college.

"My loyalty is to my wife, Anne, and my daughter, Jacqueline, and Bob's is to his wife, and rightly so," Lynn says. "No longer are Bob and I the closest people in each other's lives."

Lynn's wife is a graduate student in the economics department.

Earlier in life, Bob says, he and Lynn were mistaken for each other, but they do not look as identical anymore. Bob is slightly smaller than Lynn and has a mustache. Lynn wears glasses and has a few gray hairs among the brown ones.

But Lynn says, "Even now, about twice a year one of us will call home

and be talking to our parents, they won't know who it is because our voices are similar."

Dr. Bhaswar Moitra, a professor in the economics department, the basic difference between the brothers is that Lynn is far more gregarious than Bob.

"Bob is more laid back and relaxed, whereas Lynn is trying to train guys who can go out and aggressively compete in the world," Moitra says.

Neither Bob nor Lynn have a free time these days.

Lynn says, "If I'm not working teaching, which I am a great deal then I am spending my time with Jacqueline and Anne or at church. Otherwise I have a tough time relaxing."

Bob spends most of his time working and what little free time he enjoys spending with his wife.

"I want to be involved in the church that make an eternal difference cause Christ is what makes me who I am," Bob says. "My wife and I would like to be missionaries in Africa."

Fifteen years ago Bob and Lynn were both self-proclaimed "liberal heart liberals" who could care less about businesses and politics, they say. They were headed towards careers in baseball and law in Virginia.

In a classroom much like the one they teach in today, they were challenged by the analytical aspects of economics. As they say, they "saw light" and pursued instead of them to teaching economics.

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