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'Accidental Administrator' Bids Adieu

There's an old French proverb that goes like this: "One meets his destiny often in the road he takes to avoid it."

The much-cited saying is remarkably apropos of the career evolution of Gene Lucas, the executive vice chancellor at UC Santa Barbara, a longtime campus leader who became such without really meaning to. Call him the accidental administrator.

"I've almost never done what I thought I was going to do," said the infinitely affable Lucas, who will retire this month after 36 years of service to the campus. "And what was done was because circumstances arose and there was an opportunity to take. I certainly had no intention of becoming an administrator. I haven't gone looking for it, but administration has always found me."

And how.

During his 11-year gig as executive vice chancellor, Lucas has also served in leadership roles with the Graduate Division, the library and academic personnel, among others. Prior to that, he held, over the years, four top positions in the College of Engineering — the department where he studied as an undergrad in the early '70s and returned as faculty in 1978.

"I am honored to congratulate Executive Vice Chancellor Gene Lucas, and to express the heartfelt thanks of our academic community for his deep and sustained devotion to our university," said Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "As a distinguished alumnus, outstanding teacher, admired researcher, visionary administrative leader and caring

staff advocate, Gene has contributed in countless ways to advancing the mission and stature of UC Santa Barbara. We are profoundly grateful for his transformative leadership and enduring legacy.”

Perhaps someone should thank his sister.

Lucas’s first exposure to UCSB came as a teenager visiting his older sibling at college. Born and raised in Downey, “a community cut right out of the orange groves” in Orange County, he took right away to the oceanfront campus with what was then a brand new program in engineering. The son of an engineer — his father enjoyed a long career in private industry after earning a chemical engineering degree at USC — Lucas planned to follow suit.

“I must have inherited some of his genes because I was good in science and math, and liked it, and sort of got directed into engineering as a result,” Lucas said. “I took one class in nuclear engineering at UCSB and loved it. I got my undergrad degree here in 1973, then went off to MIT for my master’s and a doctorate. I was originally planning to go into industry, until I got recruited into an academic job. I came back here as an assistant professor in the fall of 1978 and I’ve been here ever since.”

And for that the campus owes a debt of gratitude to G. Robert Odette, a professor of mechanical engineering and of materials. As a young faculty member in UCSB’s nascent nuclear engineering program in the early 1970s, Odette had “only a handful of students, but they were awesome and highly competitive with one another, but in a very friendly way.”

Lucas was part of that handful and, Odette recalled recently, “stood head and shoulders above the rest.” Odette oversaw Lucas’s senior project and the two built a strong rapport.

And so it came to be that Odette, while on a faculty recruiting trip to the East Coast a few years later, invited Lucas out to dinner. Lucas was closing in on his science doctorate at MIT, where he’d already been asked to join the faculty. But with an offer to work at UCSB, Odette upended his plans. The two would go on to become close friends, and to build a world-renowned university research group.

“I remember that conversation vividly,” Lucas said of rejecting MIT to return to Santa Barbara. “They were not expecting that. But it turned out to be the right thing for me because wonderful things have happened at UCSB since I’ve been here, not the

least of which is to start a materials program that became number one in the country. I've had a great run since I came back."

Odette couldn't agree more, crediting Lucas with "leaving giant footprints that helped lead our campus into international prominence."

"What I and others have always seen in Gene is a tremendous brilliance combined with humility and a sense of humor that makes people happy to follow his lead," Odette said. "Gene's impact on the College of Engineering and UCSB are self-evident and represented by unchallenged facts. Put simply, we would not be where we are today without Gene's inspiring and selfless leadership."

Among Lucas's indelible contributions to campus: his work on UCSB's Strategic Academic Plan, Long Range Development Plan and the ongoing accreditation process with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. He has been a key player in efforts to enhance operational efficiencies and effectiveness across campus and improve UCSB's information technology infrastructure.

Perhaps more notably still, given the economic climate that has hung over much of his tenure as executive vice chancellor, Lucas for years co-chaired a budget strategy committee. He has since been applauded for helping to guide the campus through challenging budgetary times while maintaining — even growing — its quality and momentum.

"Gene provided steady and stable leadership during difficult times," said David Marshall, the Michael Douglas Dean of Humanities and Fine Arts, and a professor of English and comparative literature, who has worked closely with Lucas. "His good sense, good judgment and good humor kept the campus moving forward; his commitment to excellence at UCSB inspired trust and confidence and brought out the best in his colleagues. We owe a great deal to Gene's quiet yet remarkably effective leadership."

Lucas's many professional milestones also include myriad teaching and service awards, eight outstanding faculty awards and election as a fellow of the American Nuclear Society. Most recently, he was named to the 2014 class of American Association for the Advancement of Science fellows, "for distinguished contributions to the field of mechanical deformation and fracture in structural materials and for extraordinary leadership in university administration."

In addition to his roles in modernizing and expanding the bricks-and-mortar footprint of the campus that was once a collection of military barracks, Lucas himself takes the most pride in seeing his alma mater grow its research reputation and academic stature.

“When I was here as an undergrad, UCSB was a good place — not a great place — but certainly building a strong foundation,” Lucas said. “Now it is a great place. We really do hire the best and brightest and the students are fantastic. We compete with everyone and top-tier universities are always here ‘shopping’ for faculty.

“There is a real sense of teamwork at UCSB, which I think has for a long time been one of the hallmarks of the campus,” he continued. “Faculty work very well together across disciplinary lines to do teaching and research. Staff work well together across departmental lines in order to get a job done. Our students are collaborative, too. They want to see each other succeed. I think that is probably a competitive edge for us.”

Long after his last official day at UCSB, Lucas is still likely to use the royal “we” when he speaks about the campus that’s been his home away from home and is, literally, part of his family.

“My sister was the first to come here, but after me my brother was a student here, too,” Lucas said. “My wife joined me here in her junior year and my brother’s wife joined him here. One of my three sons went to UCSB and so did one of my nieces. And my mother-in-law went to UCSB when it was still at the Riviera campus. That’s a lot of Gauchos. We have blue and gold blood, I guess.”

Family is first and foremost on Lucas’s to-do list as he looks ahead to retirement. Spending more time with his three grandchildren and traveling the world with his wife, Susan, are priorities. Long-languishing projects around the house and a little writing are also in his sights.

“At one point in time I was a pretty good golfer, but since I took this job I haven’t played in six or seven years,” he said. “I think I’ll find my clubs, dust them off and see if I can still play. Maybe I’ll even buy new clubs.”

Beyond that, Lucas isn’t sure what’s in the cards. And he’s ok with that. This “accidental administrator” is little phased by curveballs; he built an entire career on them.

“I’ve always done these administrative jobs with some trepidation and didn’t necessarily want to do them,” Lucas said. “But part of me must like it, and I must be somewhat good at it, because I keep getting asked to do these things. Which makes me wonder what else I’m going to be asked to do that I don’t know about at this point.

“They say luck comes to the well prepared,” he added. “I feel well prepared, so I guess it’s time to get lucky.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.