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The First Ten Years

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The First Ten Years

Michael Pritchard

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in Society

It has been my privilege to serve as director of the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society during its first 10 years on our campus. Having been here from the beginning, I should be in a good position to say something about the center's origins and development.

I begin with origins. For me, a pivotal moment was when I received a phone call in 1984 from Jim Peterson in our Department of Sociology. He said he had learned from Vivian Weil at the Illinois Institute for Technology's Center for the Study of Ethics in the Professions that I had an interest in whistleblowing and that we might benefit from talking with each other. Dan Farrell (Management) and Jim were working on a monograph on whistleblowing for a series of publications on ethics in engineering that the IIT center was developing. Vivian Weil was the general editor of this series and someone I had met a few years earlier at an IIT workshop on engineering ethics. How ironic, I thought, that Jim

and I would learn of our mutual interest in whistleblowing via a Chicago connection, even though for several years our offices had been only several hundred yards apart! This is perhaps an extreme example of how chancy it was learning that faculty outside my own department had serious academic interests in ethics. But most of these initial encounters were fortuitous rather than planned. Jim Jaksa (Communication) and I began our conversations of ethics on the tennis courts as we disputed each other's judgment about whether the ball landed in or out. We learned through casual conversation with Ron Kramer (Sociology) that Ron had file drawers full of information about the Ford Pinto controversy of the late 1970's and early 1980's--a case study Jim and I regularly used in a class we began teaching together. Shirley Bach (then in General Studies, now in Philosophy) and I had worked together on the Ethics Committee for WMU's Science for Citizens Center, I succeeded her as chair of our Institutional Review Board, we team-taught a course on the idea of acceptable risk, and we organized a few public programs on medical ethics. And so on.

It is clear that much was going on in the

ethics arena at WMU prior to the existence of the ethics center. But whether anyone in one discipline knew about the interests in ethics of those in other disciplines was, it seemed, happenstance. It occurred to several of us that establishing an ethics center might better enable those interested in the study of ethics to learn from each other and contribute to public discussion of societal issues in ethics. So, in the summer of 1985 Shirley Bach, Jim Jaksa, and I decided to convene a conference of WMU faculty we suspected shared our interest in ethics to see if it made sense to form an ethics center. Invitations were sent to 20 faculty across the curriculum to attend a 2 day conference on campus (not at an exotic resort!) to talk about ethics. Held during the month of August--with the promise of no more than good conversation, coffee, lemonade, and cookies--this conference was an enormous success. Of the 20 invites, 19 took a break from their vacation time to attend. Fortified by the promise of a small sum of start-up money from the Office of Academic Affairs, our proposal to form a center was enthusiastically endorsed by the group. So, we were off and running.

During the 1985-6 academic year we had

public presentations by 9 visitors to our campus, 9 WMU faculty, 3 members of the professional community, and President Diether Haenicke. Thus, our very first year set the precedent for the 15-20 public programs we offer each year. Soon we formed study groups of faculty and members of the community on topics such as ethics in organizations and journalistic ethics. In the ensuing years we have received grants to conduct workshops for faculty on teaching ethics, to offer lecture series on medical ethics, business ethics, ethical issues in science and technology, and to conduct research on ethics in engineering. We have co-sponsored 4 national conferences on communication ethics. Faculty have collaborated in publishing articles, books, and educational resources. We have worked closely with other ethics centers at Wayne State University, Indiana University, and the Illinois Institute of Technology, as well as with the recently formed national Association for Practical and Professional Ethics. With the generous support of the Winnie Veenstra Endowment, we offer annual presentations on topics related to peace. With Joseph Ellin's expert editorship, we publish several outstanding center presentations each year. We

have sent a team of undergraduate students to the first and second Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl competitions held at IIT. (A team will be sent to Washington, D.C. in spring 1997 to participate in the Ethics Bowl.)

A remarkable feature of our first 10 years is that virtually all of the work of the center has been done by volunteers. None of the Executive Board positions are salaried. The Board is composed of faculty from across the university who are otherwise fully employed in their disciplines. Equally remarkable is the fact that, of the original 8 member board, 4 remain on the board and 3 others served until their retirement. As new members have been added, it has been important to retain the board's interdisciplinary composition. The Center for the Study of Ethics in Society is committed to the notion that the serious study of ethics has a place across the curriculum. That those who volunteer to serve on the board tend to stay testifies, I think, to the broadly interdisciplinary appeal of ethics.

Years ago a Doonesbury comic strip suggested that ethics in higher education, like streaking, is just another passing fad. We believe the track record of our center suggests quite the

opposite; and we look forward to our next 10 years of encouraging and supporting research, teaching, and service to the university and community in areas of applied and professional ethics. The essays that follow provide some idea of the promise and challenges that lie ahead.