

Eckerd Professor Felice retires after 26 years teaching human rights

By Claire Bomer, Senior Reporter May 15, 2021 0



Professor Bill Felice and his students on a class trip in 2007. The class went to the U.N. in Geneva Switzerland.
Photo courtesy of Bill Felice

After a long career of shaping how international relations and human rights are taught at Eckerd College, Professor of Political Science Bill Felice is retiring at the end of this school year. Over his 26 years, he has been recognized as one of the most passionate and inspirational professors at this college.

On March 31, over 265 students, faculty and alumni gathered on Zoom to watch his ‘final lecture’. As an expert on human rights and international ethics, Felice has taught his students how to make a difference in the international community by giving them a classroom where they can grow.

“My objective in the classroom is to give students the tools to be able to determine for themselves what they want to do once they see the reality of the world,” Felice said.

Felice spent much of his time in undergrad as an activist for social justice. At University of Washington (UW), he was involved in the Civil Rights Movement and the Anti-War Movement against the Vietnam War. He was elected student government president after running with a group of students on an anti-war platform.

“I was a pretty conservative student, and grew up in the Christian church. It was during the four years that I was an undergrad that I really became radicalized,” Felice said.

When Felice graduated with a bachelor’s degree in history, he wasn’t sure what he was going to do next. He knew that he didn’t have the same aspiration to be a lawyer that he had when he started school.

He decided to go to Colombia to improve his Spanish, as he studied it at UW. But he soon found he had aspirations to work in Chile to stop the human rights abuses from the regime of Augusto Pinochet, the president at the time, who tortured his political opponents.

When he came back to the United States, Felice worked for the International League for the Rights of Peoples in New York. At this Non-Governmental Organization, he worked for the rights of indigenous people in Guatemala and East Timor.

“I felt really great, like I was doing what I should be doing. I felt like the work was making a difference in the world,” Felice said.

But Felice soon realized that his passion was in teaching. He graduated with his Ph.D. in political science from NYU in 1992. His inspiration came from his professor Richard Faulk, who taught him how impactful academia could be.

“He really talked about the role of an academic and he combined activism with academics. So I saw him sort of as a citizen pilgrim,” Felice said.

Felice joined Eckerd College’s Political Science and International Relations Department in 1995 as an assistant professor. Professor of Political Science Mary Meyer McAleese chaired the search committee to find a new professor who could help shape the newly-created International Relations major by bringing in expertise in international political economy and human rights. McAleese said Felice was the perfect candidate for the job.

McAleese noted that Felice strengthened the international relations and global affairs (IRGA) major by connecting with diplomats from all over the world. He also helped develop the many Winter Term trips to the United Nations over the years, from New York to Geneva. He directed Eckerd’s Honors College program from 2004-2012 and was the associate dean of general education from 2013-2016. In 2006, he was selected as the Florida Professor of the Year by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

“He’s been a gracious colleague, he’s done a lot for the IRGA program and he’s done a lot for the college,” McAleese said.

Since 1996, Felice has published six books on international politics and human rights, many of which he uses to guide his courses. “Ethics of Interdependence” has been used in Eckerd’s Human Experience course to educate first-years about the duties of individuals and nations in the global stage. “How Do I Save My Honor,” published in 2009, was written over his concerns for the Iraq War. Now, he is teaching with his newest book written with Professor of Economics Diana Fuguitt, “Human Rights and Human Goods” in his International Political Economy course.

Some of his favorite courses over the years are Human Rights and International Law, and Hunger, Plenty and Justice. Other classes he regularly teaches include Introduction to International Relations, Ethics of International Relations, and International Environmental Law. Junior political science and environmental studies major Katie Genovesi is currently taking his International Political Economy course. She loves taking classes with Felice because she can see his passion for teaching and learning in the classroom.

“He challenges the way I think, he challenges the way I learn,” Genovesi said. “He asks me to examine my thoughts, and if I am to present an idea, I should really explain why I feel that way and have actual evidence to back up my, my beliefs.”

Genovesi said Felice has taught her that it’s OK to be wrong, and that he even inspired her to see teaching as a future career path for herself.

“I’ve learned so much with students,” Felice said. “I approach my students as my equal. They’re equally intelligent, equally committed. They’re equal in every way.”

Felice’s classes are often discussion driven. After he briefly lectures, he challenges students to think critically about what they have learned. He said these discussions are what he will remember the most from his years at Eckerd.

“The memories I have are when students are really clicking, when the materials get clear to students, and they’re responding. There’s nothing better in the world. It’s a sense of fulfillment that you have,” Felice said.

As a faculty member of the college, Felice is also a mentor for political science and IRGA majors. He said he still hears from alumni who have gone on to law school and international organizations to carry on what he taught them.

“His gift,” McAleese said, “is that he has understood, probably better than most of us, the idealism of college students, and he has been able to tap into that. By tapping into that when he’s talking about human rights, he’s able to give them a sense of empowerment and help them to feel that they can make a difference.”

After surviving a nearly fatal brain hemorrhage in 2019, Felice returned after a semester-long leave to finish his career strong. Now, at 70 years old, he is retiring feeling sad but also excited about what is next.

“So I’ll expand my horizons. I’m sort of like a college senior, out in the world now, trying to figure out the next step,” Felice said.



Claire Bomer
Managing Editor

Claire is a senior majoring in political science and minoring in journalism. She loves watching Marvel movies and longboarding.