

# Tar Heel of the Week: Former NCSU professor Elliot Engel's English Lit lectures Inspire

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Elliot Engel spins a tale of England's Bronte sisters that feels more like a soap opera than a lecture on 19th century literature.

Emily's long hours staring at drawn window shades. Charlotte's unfortunate homeliness. Anne's short career as a governess, ended by her brother's affair with the child's mother. Their improbable success as female authors and tragic early deaths.

By the end of the talk last week at N.C. State University, some of the hundreds of freshmen in attendance lined up to buy a \$20 DVD of Engel's lectures – thanks in part to a sales pitch as effective as his talk is engaging.

“Buy it for the English teacher who thought you were brighter than you actually were,” he says. “Don't you owe that teacher something?”

Engel, 66, has greeted the university's incoming freshmen for more than 25 years, just one of hundreds of lectures he delivers every year at schools and libraries, conventions for English teachers, and other events – often returning to the same sites year after year.

Dubbed a “stand-up scholar,” the former N.C. State professor has been a freelance lecturer on topics from North Carolina history to British literature for more than 30 years. He recently recorded his 100th CD lecture, digital renderings of his lively talks that benefit the children's hospital founded by Charles Dickens, the focus of much of Engel's scholarly work.

Engel also heads the Dickens Fellowship of North Carolina, the largest chapter of the international group. In that role, he is poised to launch a statewide scholarship program that will require students to record historical re-enactments from their home counties.

Engel is quick to note the difference between his former job and his current one, which has no grades or set expectations. His main goal is simply to

inspire in his audience an appreciation for his topics, and perhaps a desire to read great books.

“Dickens is a populist, and I got from him the idea that you want to reach as many people as possible,” he says. “I think if you have the enthusiasm and the background information, you really can create readers of great literature.”

Margaret King, a retired N.C. State professor and administrator who co-authored a book with Engel, says his innovative spirit led him out of the classroom, allowing him to widen his reach.

“Elliot has done more than anyone I know in the humanities to make literary and historical figures and movements accessible to the general public,” says King. “The classroom was a bit poorer without him, but he ended up enriching a lot more people.”

Engel grew up in Indiana, one of two children in a home that was more Eastern European than Midwestern. His parents were Jewish immigrants from Hungary and Russia, and he grew up with a commitment to education and a mandate to succeed.

Unlike his sister, he was also a born talker who delighted his parents by turning his days at school into tall tales at the dinner table.

“Every day they would say, ‘What did you do?’ and I would launch into an elaborate description,” he says. “And they loved it. I never had any problem with feeling shy in front of a group because of that.”

His father missed the chance to go to law school during the Depression, and instead ran a women’s hosiery shop. At his family’s urging, Engel planned to study law when he earned an English degree at Indiana University, though he says he would have rather pursued teaching.

His parents endorsed his aspirations to teach only when he earned a full scholarship to graduate school that was earmarked for students who planned to be professors.

He earned master's and doctoral degrees at UCLA, where a particularly engaging teacher's fascination with Dickens rubbed off on him.

"I fell in love with her love of Dickens, it was so contagious," he says. "I wanted to be as excited about my topics as she was about Dickens."

He came to Raleigh in 1975 to teach at N.C. State and was soon made director of a new initiative, the Humanities Extension Program, aimed at spreading knowledge of the humanities throughout the state in much the same way the university disseminates its research in more technical fields.

The idea was to put the university's best humanities professors on the road, lecturing at libraries and other community sites in all 100 counties. Engel started out arranging these visits, and eventually did a few lectures himself.

They went so well, he says, he asked for a leave of absence to lecture more widely. After a few years, he was picked up by several national speakers bureaus. He decided to leave teaching in favor of speaking.

His talks are performances with a scholarly basis that are short on citations, dates and anything else that slows down the narrative. Yet Engel says the information is gleaned from extensive research, with each detail cross-referenced through more than a year of research on each topic.

Topics range from the Wright Brothers to Dickens to Winston Churchill. Yet Engel says they all have a common trait.

"They're all about somebody that you know something, but not enough, about," he says. "And by the time you leave, you know them in a way you never knew them before."

His style is conspiratorial, as if he's dishing dirt on a neighbor. And his insights come quickly, one after another, in an avalanche of clever asides.

In the case of the Bronte sisters, he says they turned to writing when their brother's scandalous affair ended their hopes of being employed as governesses. As Engel tells it, Charlotte Bronte told her sisters: "Last year was God's way of telling us we should not be in education. I think God wants us to be novelists."

Not long after he started the talks, in 1980, he was asked to organize a book club, and ended up gathering 200 people for monthly readings of Dickens' books.

For decades, the Dickens club offered scholarships through an essay contest. That program ended in 1999, and in 2012, it was revived as a national contest using video entries.

In a few weeks, the group will invite the state's middle and high school students to send clips they record of themselves re-enacting local historical scenes. In all, the group plans to give away more than \$20,000 in scholarships and other prizes.

For Engel, the "My County Counts" program will in a way help him return to his initial goal of bringing an appreciation of the humanities to the entire state. "If I can inspire that, then I've accomplished something," he says.

Read more at:

<https://www.newsobserver.com/news/local/education/article10058003.html#storylink=cpy>

