UW-RF honors Ed Peterson’s legacy
Jennie Oemig

Following a ceremony April 7 in the Alumni Room of South Hall, former students, colleagues and loved ones made their way to 224 South Hall to view the plaque that will forever commemorate the space as the Ed Peterson Classroom.

Peterson, one of the most revered history professors at UW-River Falls, died of heart failure March 25, 2005, after 51 years of dedicated teaching.

“Dr. Ed Peterson had an incredible history of accomplishments, with over 50 years of highly effective teaching and scholarship at UW-RF,” theatre professor Gorden Hedahl said via e-mail. “He spent the vast majority of his career teaching in South Hall 224, and he always called it his favorite room on campus. A record of 50 years of teaching without ever missing a full day of class is simply remarkable and must be recognized.”

Chancellor Don Betz, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Terry Brown and Peterson’s wife, Ursula, all spoke a few words of remembrance about the late professor.

“There are a lot of people we could hold a reception for and there would be empty chairs,” Betz said, acknowledging the large crowd that had gathered. “There aren’t many empty chairs here today.”

Though he never knew Peterson the way his other colleagues did, Betz is well aware of the legacy Peterson left behind.

“He was some of the walking history of this institution,” Betz said.

Many buildings on campus bear the
names of prominent figures who have graced the sidewalks of UW-RF, but this dedication was a first.

“This is the first time a classroom has been dedicated to a teacher,” Brown said, commending Peterson’s dedication to the University and its students over the years.

Ursula took several of those gathered at the ceremony for a stroll down memory lane, reminiscing about the changes the campus had gone through since she and her husband first arrived at UW-RF in 1954. She also acknowledged his special relationship with both his students and colleagues.

“He loved his students and he loved his colleagues, and I thank you very much for dedicating the room,” she said.

Hedahl proposed the idea to officially name the room in Peterson’s honor shortly after his death and got the ball rolling.

“The Wisconsin System has special procedures to be followed in order to name a room or a facility, so I developed the justification and then had it approved by the governance groups and campus administration,” Hedahl said.

During his illustrious teaching career, Peterson touched the lives of many of his students. Leila Albert, a senior history major, had the opportunity to get to know Peterson on a more personal level when he became her mentor.

“Ed was valued and admired by so many students because he did not so much teach to them, but more so he learned with them,” Albert said. “I valued him as a mentor and teacher because he interacted with me as an intellectual and as an equal.”

Although history professor Kiril Petkov only knew him for a short time, Peterson touched his life, as well.

“I loved him and I deeply miss him, as so many of us do,” Petkov said.

Hedahl was unable to return from Scotland to attend the dedication, but said he was pleased there was a ceremony to recognize his work and accomplishments.

“Clearly there are other plaques on campus, and Dr. Peterson’s name appears appropriately on both the College of Arts and Sciences Awards wall in KFA, and on the Outstanding Teaching wall in WEB [Wyman Education Building],” Hedahl said. “However, it seemed appropriate to do something special to honor his extraordinary career, and I thought that it would be most appropriate that ‘his favorite room’ in the building that he helped to save would be named for him, and that it would always be the Ed Peterson Classroom.”

Both Hedahl and Albert said they felt the dedication of South Hall 224 was an appropriate gesture, as did so many others who knew him.

“He did more than mentor me. When he shared information, he touched my heart, as well as my mind,” Albert said. “The dedication is certainly due, because he truly dedicated his life to education, to the campus community and to South Hall.”