Bill Jason Priest, Community College Pioneer

Whitson, Kathleen Krebs, Gleazer, Edmund J.

Published by University of North Texas Press

Whitson, Kathleen Krebs and Edmund J. Gleazer.
Bill Jason Priest, Community College Pioneer.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7386.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/7386

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=310563
In a *Dallas Morning News* article in 1995, the description was given, “He was a thoroughly upright, cantankerous, feisty individual, and Americans have always had a soft spot for that type of figure.” Those were the words of a political science professor from Tulane University about Harry S. Truman. It could have been said of Bill J. Priest. It was not, however, sentimentality that has caused history to view Truman as a political icon or Priest as a community college icon. It is the strength of character of each. Each man led with a forthrightness with no hidden agendas, no phoniness, just plain “what you see is what you get.” Both men also represented the common man, unpretentious, and without guile.

The man Priest is personally is the man he was professionally. In personal interviews and written descriptions, the first word on the list of adjectives describing Priest was honest or truthful. This was followed by such phrases as “straight shooter,” “no false signals,” and the certainty of knowing where he stood and where you stood in his estimation. This was consistent with personal friends, professional acquaintances, and his detractors. Priest always diminished compliments of any kind with a deflecting bit of humor.
He often said, “I don’t have a good enough memory to lie.” The consensus is that truthfulness is what he values in others and demands of himself. Diogenes, the Greek Cynic philosopher in the mid-first century who carried a lantern about in the daylight in search of an honest man, could have ceased searching if he had met Bill Priest.

Complete honesty is a double-edged sword. Most people are not prepared to handle total honesty especially if it is wielded toward them. Priest did not use tact and finesse in his straightforward presentation of criticisms and direct enumeration of mistakes. This bluntness was not well received by some. Betty Meachum, psychology instructor at Cedar Valley College, remembered feeling humiliated in front of her peers in her first encounter with Priest. She was the newly elected faculty association president from her campus and in the initial district council meeting, all seven of the outgoing presidents, the seven new incoming presidents, and the vice chancellors were present. They were having a discussion about sabbatical approval notifications for faculty. Quite often the faculty member was being congratulated by colleagues before receiving official notification. The discussion concluded with Priest adding to the minutes that the first part of the notification process would be a “rah rah letter” sent from his office. Meachum recalled, “I sort of laughed and said, ‘I can tell you really mean that.’ The room fell deathly silent. He looked at me and said, ‘I do mean it, and if you knew me better, you’d know that I mean it. I hope you get to know me well enough to know that I mean it.’ I think he was insensitive about how his direct manner could hurt people.”

Priest did mean it. He cared about all the employees. He respected faculty and wanted them to feel appreciated and honored. His seemingly sarcastic description of the letter was his laconic style. If a bit of slang could convey his message, that’s what he used. He was being to the point that the concern about notification had been heard and would be addressed. He did not use unnecessary flowery accolades or a long line of adjectives, considering them to be superfluous.
Although his attitude was sometimes difficult to take, almost everyone indicated it was easier to do what was expected when it was made clear as to what those expectations were. You did not have to be fearful of unspoken motivations or attempts at manipulation. Reba Blackshear, president of the DCCCD Faculty Association Council in 1980, respected Priest’s no frills honesty. She indicated that it translated into fairness when negotiating with faculty. She said, “I tell him exactly what I think . . . I respect a person I disagree with, and he is fair every time.”

One newspaper account in California in 1960 reported a faculty member saying, “Priest wants what is best for Priest, and woe to anyone who gets in his way.” The article described the feelings among the employees at American River College as ranging from “real dislike to near hero worship.” By all accounts, that range persisted in Dallas as well. D Magazine quoted a faculty member who presented himself as the spokesperson for the whole faculty, “The faculty are kind of intimidated. They know their place. . . . If you’re good, you get to go to work in the big house. If not, you got to go work in their field, and it’s hot out there.”

Obviously Priest did not enjoy ubiquitous admiration. Even his most severe critics, however, acquiesced to the evidence of his accomplishments. One DCCCD administrator, who asked for anonymity, expressed contempt for Priest and described him as controlling and brutally honest in expressing his opinion about people. That same person expressed respect for Priest professionally and admiration for the things he had accomplished in and for higher education. The criticisms of Priest generally were that he wielded power in order to control, or that he blatantly presented his opinion as fact, or used his verbal adroitness to skewer unsuspecting victims.

Of those who could be categorized as “hero worshipers,” Priest’s shortcomings seemed to be dismissed or viewed as positives. The first president of the first faculty association in the district, Gayle Weaver said, “There was no question of who was captain of the ship, but he acknowledged the value of the faculty and always took suggestions. He was the best man for the job. I never saw weaknesses.”
A weakness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. His attempt to control was sometimes an unintended influence. Betty Meachum was elected Cedar Valley Faculty Association president a second time. She recalled an incident where a biased critical remark from Priest probably cost an instructor his sabbatical. The faculty association presidents from each of the seven colleges had gathered to review faculty applications for sabbaticals. The group was charged with selecting five to recommend to the Board of Trustees. For convenience and privacy they were meeting downtown in Priest’s office. A couple of times Priest came through to get something from his desk or file. On the second time through his office, Priest asked how it was coming. They had narrowed the list to around ten and read those names to Priest. According to Meachum, at the reading of one instructor’s name, Priest cavalierly said as he was walking out, “You mean you’d give a sabbatical to that long-haired hippie?” Meachum felt the remark was unprofessional, and it was not discussed in anyway, no one in the group even referred to it. But, in the final decision, the instructor did not get a sabbatical. Meachum believed the group had been swayed by that passing remark, not from fear of retribution from Priest, but because he was so deeply respected that his opinion was powerfully influential.

Priest described himself as blunt, but not capricious. He said he decided early in his life that truthfulness was easier because it was all too complicated to mislead. Although unbridled honesty can sting, he did not shield himself from the returning shots. He believed it was the job of the chief administrator to protect the institution by remaining in the line of fire. It was the duty of the president or chancellor to step up to meet the challenge, whatever it was, and to take the criticism, from whomever it came. In his own words in an article published in the Junior College Journal in 1962, he defined the lead role of an institution of higher education as meaning, “You are obliged and privileged to be the prime target.” He also stated that the best defense is being armed with accurate information.

Priest’s personal values of honesty, monogamous relationships, traditional lifestyles, unquestionable integrity, a strong work ethic,
punctuality, and obedience to the laws of the land influenced his professional decisions. He never imposed his values on others. There were times people would bring him stories about behaviors of DCCCD employees outside of their jobs. Priest ignored these. His only concern was its affect on job performance or possible harm from negative opinions in the community.

Some disagreed with his decisions. Some disagreed with his values. Abiding by the guide that kept his view of personal lives and professional performance separate, the integrity of the district was never brought into question. According to the District Public Information Office staff, on three different occasions D Magazine sent reporters to scour the files and interview employees looking for a bit of scandalous activity to report. Only one of the investigations resulted in an article with a few true, but unremarkable, criticisms. In fact, that same article quoted Trustee Robert Powell about conducting his own investigation. Powell said, “I spent many, many hours poring over past budgets, and past studies, and past everything. I finally became convinced we had a very good college district.”

That same year, Jerry Gilmore was board chair and he said of Priest, “He has undergone the most exacting scrutiny of media and assorted critics, and he has never been found wanting.” Bob Thornton, the founding board chair, never denied that Priest’s decisions were not always popular, but pointed to the fact people respected Priest for playing fair, being honest, and making decisions impartially based on what was best for the colleges and the students.

Someone who knew Priest very well and from many perspectives was Deon Holt. He had been a faculty member under Priest’s leadership in California and later he worked with him in Dallas. Holt had served as the vice chancellor of planning and development, president of Richland College, and president of Brookhaven College. In describing Priest’s management style, he referred to a book he had read in the mid-seventies on leadership, The Gamesman by Michael Maccoby. He felt Priest fit the profile presented in the book as “the jungle fighter.” Maccoby described this leader as an entrepreneur, empire builder, pragmatically
progressive, with leanings toward being a social Darwinist. The jungle fighter is one who promotes new technology and keeps the tribe (organization) moving forward, but sometimes at the expense of people’s feelings. This type of leader has the ability to sway people’s opinions and dominates through superior ideas, courage, and strength. He rewards loyalty, and his followers both fear and revere him. The description of the jungle fighter depicts a leader who succeeds with forward moving accomplishments and engenders emotional extremes in those he leads, a description which closely parallels some other’s perceptions of Priest.

Going deeper than just a judgment of whether it was good or bad, there were varied interpretations about Priest’s leadership and management style. Some even thought it was paternalistic. An example given was Priest’s policy that faculty members be allowed to teach only one semester in the summer. The reason he gave, recalled accounting instructor Clarice McCoy, was that every faculty member needed at least one summer semester off to rest because teaching was such a demanding job. Demonstrative of the duality of perceptions, she added, “It was such a condescending policy. He was so paternal. But he was the best [chancellor] we ever had. Those were the glory days.”

Whether it might be the halo factor in memories or not, the “glory days” is a phrase frequently used by early employees in describing the first twelve years of the DCCCD. Founding president of El Centro, Don Rippey, titled his book about those beginning years, Some Called it Camelot.

Claudia Robinson did not join the DCCCD staff until 1976 when she was hired as the district director of public information. She came from the corporate world of public relations. She lists Priest as the best supervisor she ever had. She, too, equates his leadership style with the somewhat controversial style of Harry S. Truman. She described Priest as having the courage of his convictions, and realizing that the buck stopped with him because if it didn’t stop somewhere, there would be chaos. She said he hired good people and then let them do their jobs. Robinson also confirmed his confrontational nature. She said, “If someone really made a blunder,
he let you know about it immediately and would often verbally go for the jugular vein, but then you would never hear about it again. You always knew where you stood with Dr. Priest. You might not like it, but you were always sure.”13

The similarities of Priest and Truman are numerous and were noted by several additional people. The very qualities that brought each of them criticism are the same ones which garnered appreciation and admiration. While President of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges, Dale Parnell gave Priest a photo of Priest delivering a speech at the AACJC conference and signed it “Give ‘Em Hell, Harry.”14

In response to that frequent campaign cheer, Truman once said, “I never gave anybody hell. I just told the truth and they thought it was hell.”15 That was the prevailing opinion among those who were close to Priest. They felt he never gave anyone hell, that those who had been admonished or strongly criticized by Priest had been told only what was accurate and true.

Both men have been described as having a clear vision of what their responsibilities were in their respective roles. Truman understood what it meant to lead a nation, but had the qualities of the common man. Priest, too, understood people from every walk of life. He could discuss government issues with officials at the state and national levels and he could discuss the skills needed to get a good job with a high school drop-out. The district was a growing success in 1971 when a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News* attributed Priest’s part in that success to being in touch with the common man, and not being a blue sky academician, nor educational elitist.16

Truman also was lauded for his ability to act decisively and swiftly. Priest, too, was called decisive and a man of action. Rudolph Giuliani, the mayor of New York City during the 9-11 terrorist attack, in his book, *Leadership*, gives quick decision making as a necessary attribute for leadership. He explained there must be a balance between speed and deliberation and the key is in knowing how to act when there’s not much time to deliberate.17 Educators place a high value on the process of decision making. The nature
of the situation does not always allow for forming a committee to
gather data, evaluate and discuss, and time to build a consensus
of the college community. For example, if the state legislature
sends out an edict with the expectation that all public institutions
of higher learning will comply, that can require immediate action.
Actions taken by the district administration without campus input
can be viewed as dictatorial or non-participatory decision making
at best.

Don Rippey said unequivocally that Priest was an autocratic
leader but he qualified that label by saying it was the acceptable
style of the times. He further described typical leadership of the
sixties as prescriptive and directive and that Priest was very good at
using those characteristics. He also credited Priest with caring about
people which tempered his direct control methods.¹⁸

Priest was keenly aware of the perceptions that he was an
autocratic leader. When asked about this opinion held by many of
the employees in the DCCCD, without hesitation, he boldly
answered, “I cultivated that perception.” He explained that by the
nature of his job, he was ultimately responsible for what transpired
in the district and ethical controls were essential. Whatever
prescriptive action was deemed necessary by the situation was easier
to affect if everyone already had the impression of the chancellor
as being an authoritarian figure. Priest said, “No one is surprised if
I issue a directive if they believe me to be autocratic. They just say,
‘What’d you expect,’ and they do it.” Always the pragmatist even at
the expense of his own self-image, Priest put the well being of the
district above all else.¹⁹

Priest did not want anyone trying to explain or excuse his
behavior when it was criticized. He calls himself blunt and stubborn
to a fault, but prefers that people confront him with their
disagreement rather than discuss it with colleagues. His secretary
in the late seventies, Linda Timmerman, said she had once tried to
explain to an unhappy employee what was behind a decision that
Priest had made. She told Priest about it, and he admonished her.
He told her not to offer explanations for which she may not have
all the facts. He said he did not need her to defend him but to
advise the person to come to him and express their concerns. Timmerman said she realized that he was right.  

Priest was confident and self assured, but did not approach management with an unbending attitude. Some thought so, but those who worked closely with him knew he would listen to facts. Priest was a believer in researching a matter thoroughly before taking it to a group for discussion. In an article written for new college presidents, Priest warned them not to pretend to know all the answers because no one knows all the answers. He mused, “Don’t let it be said of you, ‘He may be wrong, but he is never in doubt.”  

Mittlestet, Holt, Robinson, and numerous others have given accounts of bringing in new ideas, or disagreeing with decisions that had been made, and that after a presentation of additional information, Priest had changed his mind. Robinson added, “But you better have your ducks all in a row and be prepared to answer good probing questions.”  

Perhaps the best summation of Priest’s strong but sometimes controversial leadership style came from a reporter with the Sacramento Union newspaper in an article announcing Priest’s appointment as the first superintendent of Los Rios Junior College District. His approval for the job had come on a split vote by the Los Rios Board of Trustees setting an uncertain tone for Priest’s leadership. The reporter wrote, “Any man offering positive leadership must necessarily take a firm stand, which might not elicit universal approval from all, but this frequently is the price of such leadership. Priest is highly regarded as an able administrator among other junior college executives in the state.” With those words he ascribed personal integrity to Priest and presented decisiveness as an essential to good leadership.  

At the top of the list of attributes needed for leadership is communication. Almost any book on leadership will delineate good communication as having verbal and writing skills, and knowing what to communicate and when. Priest did not consider himself to be a good public speaker. He felt that the more he prepared the worse his presentation was, but he did not feel that he was glib enough to rely on extemporaneous delivery. Those who have ever heard him
give a speech disagree with his self-effacing estimation of his skills. His use of language is unique to him. His genuineness is apparent in his public presentations and his words and style do not vary when he is having an informal conversation. An important element of being an effective public speaker is the ability to read the audience. Priest has that skill as well as an understanding of what people want to hear and what they need to hear. When being introduced for a public address, Priest says that his part in Hiroshima and/or his baseball career are usually included in that introduction. The historic significance that Hiroshima holds gives a heroic aura to his persona and his stint in professional baseball adds interest to his profile as an educational professional. He uses the public’s interest level in those subjects to the advantage of his main purpose. He explained, “I long ago found that when you are talking to lay groups about education, be sure you digress frequently into other topics because they are a hell of a lot more interested in those than they are in education. But you can sell a little education by currying their goodwill by talking about other things.”

His philosophy is that nothing is worse than a dull drab speech regardless of the content. Priest believes it is the speaker’s duty to be mercifully brief and to expand or exclude material based on the audience. Deny it though he might, Priest was and is an excellent and entertaining speaker. He reads his audiences well; he has marketing savvy and a natural wit, all attributes of good public speaking.

While not comfortable at the public podium during his professional career, he was completely comfortable in meetings or individual conversations with anyone from any background. His command of language and his breadth of knowledge made him an able conversationalist in any situation. In an article in Scene Magazine in 1971, Thornton said of Priest, “He can be talking finance one minute, approaching senators and congressmen about appropriations, and talk baseball or tennis the next. He can talk to and in the vernacular of every element we have [in Dallas]. To me, that is Bill’s greatness. He is in every facet of education, but he is down to earth with his feet on the ground in everything from education to business.”
Priest’s use of language intertwines the evidence of his level of education and years of voracious reading with the casualness of slang and colloquialisms, punctuated with the occasional expletive. He uses profanity with selectivity, however, and consideration of those in the room. The way he strings words together gives a freshness to familiar ideas and clarity to new ones. He can take a complex concept and reduce it to a concise statement. In a 1974 article on executive stress in *Sunday Magazine* in the *Dallas Times Herald*, Priest outlined what he labeled the “major dilemma of an executive career ladder.” He said, “At what point are you as high as you should go—one step too high is tragic and yet you never know if you’ll be good at the next level until you get there. But then it’s almost impossible to turn back.” Although it was not his intention, Priest clearly stated in this succinct statement the essence of *The Peter Principle* by Laurence J. Peter.

Priest personally answered most of the communications sent to him. If it was a memo, he often wrote a response across the top or on a separate sheet of paper if it was a longer reply. He saw no reason to dictate to his secretary, have her type it, proof it, and perhaps retype it. He felt that would delay the response from him that would keep things moving. He knew what he wanted to say and how he wanted to say it. That was sufficient. Unlike many people in fast paced positions, his handwriting was as clear as his words. He did most of his work from his desk. This was not in an effort to avoid face to face encounters, quite the contrary. It was done because he wanted to be accessible by phone or available for appointment. There were no cell phones then and to be in the car was to be out of reach.

Priest’s appreciation of the power of words caused him to give attention to their use and misuse. He knew when his position required him to respond. He was also well aware of when his expertise level on a subject might interfere with the best explanation. When Timmerman worked for him, she recalled hearing him tell the district lawyer his intent on a conference call they were going to have. According to Timmerman, Priest said, “Let me garble it for him for a time. Then I’ll hang up and you
straighten out what I just told him.” Timmerman called the comment “classic Priest.”

Another form of expression that could be characterized as “classic Priest” was his amazingly successful use of slang. Just as it takes a very sophisticated and talented actor to perform physical comedy well, it was the cogency of Priest’s speech that lent respectability to his use of slang. As a new chancellor in a newly forming college district, Priest used a subculture word that had been adopted by teenagers in talking about Dallas to a reporter from the *Dallas Morning News*. He was describing the attraction of the city with its reputation of being energetic and ambitious “with a feeling of destiny. This is real salable. People don’t want to go to ‘Dullsville,’ but to a place that aspires to be topnotch, that will be professionally stimulating and rewarding.” He felt that if a word regarded as slang could make his point with fewer words, it was the better word. Some executives, just hired into one of the top positions in their field in a metropolitan area, might have viewed such casual use of language in the media as sounding unintelligent or an effort at sounding “hip” or youthful, but it was characteristic of Priest to be direct, concise, and casual. From him, it sounded intelligent and natural.

Just as natural to Priest was his use of humor, even at the most serious of moments. In an article he wrote in 1962, Priest warned new presidents that the position was a big job and that it was one requiring dignity, and that most achieved that level on ability and perseverance mixed with luck. Being overly impressed with one’s position could result in becoming a dignified “stuffed shirt.” He was never hesitant to make himself the target of his own humor. On one of the most austere of occasions in his career, his formal request to the Dallas County Community College District Board of Trustees for his retirement, he made the point of this being the right time for him to retire with the use of humor. He referred to administrators who remained in the top leadership position longer than was appropriate as “old goats,” and he added that he was sure there were those who thought he had long since joined their ranks.
He never talked about his baseball career without zinging himself for his short duration in the major leagues. He called it the one career at which he was so “immensely unsuccessful.” Since he had been a pitcher, he chided the batters in that they “were very uncooperative and ruined my career.”31

A sense of humor, laconic speech with a proclivity for analysis, and his leadership positions in education brought Priest numerous speaking and writing requests. His lack of formal training in public address, something he felt was a negative, freed him to rely on his natural ability.

Priest’s demeanor, like his speech, was a blend of appropriateness of etiquette and of one fully comfortable with informality, unmotivated by some inner need to impress. By the time he came to Dallas, his years behind the desk of community college leadership had added a few pounds to the muscular physique of his baseball and military years. His hair was beginning to thin and his choice of clothes, complete with bow tie, would not put him on the cover of Gentleman’s Quarterly. At Priest’s job interview these visual characteristics are what gave rise to the admonition of one DCCCD board member to another to simply listen to him and not to make judgments on his appearance. A similar observation was made by board chair Jerry Gilmore in 1980, when he told a reporter for D Magazine, “He is the kind of person that slips up on you. Sometimes he looks like he ought to be selling used cars. But if you listen to him, the man is incredibly intelligent, and he has a real grasp on the direction he feels he ought to go.”31 In various newspaper articles through the years, he had been described as “a big happy bear of a man,”32 and as having “a superficial resemblance to heavyweight champion Ingemar Johansson.”33 More recent comparisons have been to the actor Rod Steiger. Some of the descriptions of his looks are influenced by the view of his sometimes pugnacious personality. While his words are strong, his voice is gentle. He has a warm smile and a glint in his eyes.

Priest is a happy man, meaning that he realizes happiness comes from within and not from external sources. Stress and frustrations are external. In a task as large and complex as opening and then
running a multi-college district—with such varied constituencies, internal and external, to serve and keep happy—stress was inevitable. Priest understood the need for outlets for managing stress and for renewal. He enjoyed hunting, fishing, tennis, and a rousing hand of poker. As often as his schedule allowed, he indulged his love of these sports. Once, after he had retired, he negotiated a guided fishing trip to Alaska as an honorarium for presenting a commencement address.

While he was working, the easiest of these outlets to access was tennis. The sport served as both a mental and physical catharsis for him. As part of an article on handling stress, Priest explained to the reporter, “If something’s eating at me and I can’t find an answer, I find if I play an hour and a half of tennis and knock the hell out of that ball, I can come back and find a solution. I become more competent analytically if I just sweep everything away.” Indeed, he turned his mind fully to the game. He was very competitive.

Ed Gleazer remembered playing doubles with Priest as his partner. Gleazer said he was approaching the game as recreation. Finally Priest shouted to him, “GLEAZER – HIT THE DAMN BALL!” It was Gleazer’s estimation that he’d not been playing with the vigor Priest felt he should. Giving that as a single example, Gleazer said he learned from Priest that each task should be attacked with energy and determination, and he remembered those very simple but pointed words when special effort was needed in his job.

After observing Priest on the tennis court while shadowing him for material for an article in Scene Magazine in 1971, a reporter from the Dallas Morning News described Priest’s game as “playing for blood.” She said he played from the gut “with the gusto and determination of a Wimbledon finalist.” Priest admits he is a vehement competitor in all things. Tennis is a safe way to release steam, but his main objective is to win.

He was chagrined when at seventy-seven, he injured his knee while playing tennis and was doubly miffed that the healing process would keep him off the courts for an undetermined number of
months. After a variety of treatments and physical therapy, the final prognosis was no more tennis—ever. He had lost his physical outlet for negative feelings and summarily warned everyone he was going to be permanently testy.

The very fact he joked about his physical condition and predicted lack of pleasantness was an indication that while tennis had been a release valve for him, it was not essential. His true balance and sense of inner peace came from the depth of his understanding of what is real and what is worthy of emotional energy; everything is more palatable when tempered with humor.

In seeking balance in his life, Priest revered the importance of a good home life. He once told a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, “I don’t see how a person can carry on effectively in a high pressure executive role if he has to go home and listen to a shrew everyday. My home situation has been as tranquil as any I know. . . . We communicate. We have mutual respect.”

The other part of “we” was the beautiful girl who rode a horse past his home when he was a boy. Marietta Shaw had been his wife for thirty-three years when he gave the reporter that description of his marriage.

Margaret McDermott became good friends with the Priests and she said that Marietta had been one of Priest’s great strengths. Marietta was also described as absolutely honest. They did not use their honesty to berate each other on points of imperfection, but rather to settle differences and to encourage and support each other. They had each grown up in homes filled with yelling and quarreling. They promised each other to approach unavoidable differences with discussion. The evolution of communication that transpired over the years of marriage created phrases, or little expressions that indicated it was time to close the debate and move on. They developed a “chit” system. When one person felt particularly strong about an issue, he or she would ask to “cash in a chit.” That meant the person wanted to go ahead with the idea, or decision without mutual agreement on the points. It was an agreement to disagree, and to harbor no hard feelings.

Priest gave much credit to Marietta for his success. In his estimation, he could not have done all that he did or progress to
the level of chancellor without her never waning support. At his retirement celebration, he praised her as “always a tower of strength when I needed support, which was often.”

There was also a united front in child rearing. They supported each other in decisions concerning their only son, Andy. By their example, he never tried to play them against each other. Andy was an example of one of the purposes of community colleges. As a youngster, he demonstrated an aptitude in mechanical skills. He attended El Centro and a General Motors mechanics school. By the time the Eastfield auto mechanics program was in place, the young Priest had already completed his bachelor’s degree at the University of North Texas (then North Texas State University) where he graduated with honors. Andy taught in the automotive technology program at Eastfield College and occasionally served as a consultant and expert witness in vehicle collisions, giving analysis of the wreckage and physical evidence at the scene. Eventually he moved into consulting full-time.

Andy is much taller than his father, but his voice and form of expression clearly reveal his heritage. Andy has two children. The oldest, Matt, has a master’s degree from the University of Texas at Dallas in finance computer programming. Jill is completing her doctorate in paleontology at Oregon State University. Priest is close to his family. It is not unusual for Andy to stop by just because he is in the neighborhood. Matt and Jill visit their grandfather when they can and telephone often.

Priest’s one regret regarding his family is that he was not more involved and supportive of Andy’s educational pursuits. The old adage of the preacher’s kid being the least well behaved may hold true in other professions as well. Priest indicated he was so occupied with ensuring quality education for everyone else’s child that he did not attend well enough to his own. Andy attained a high level of graduate education as well as professional success, and Priest is proud of him, but wishes he had verbalized it more along the way. That would be the one point of imbalance in his professional and personal life.

Even though Priest did not unduly burden his wife with the
problems of the work day, there has to be some influence of personal life on professional life and vice versa. In selecting their new home in Texas, the Priests considered the social demands of Priest’s new job. They were given immediate social prominence by the caliber of the board who had selected him. Sought by the social editors of both major daily newspapers, Marietta had the responsibility of explaining their lifestyle and how it was reflected in the house that they would choose. She emphasized their preference for casual living. She detailed features, “I look for an open living area, like a living room-den combination, perhaps with a wood burning fireplace: sort of an indoor-outdoor feeling.” The house they bought near White Rock Lake personified those words, and Priest repeated those sentiments some twenty-nine years later in retelling their house-hunting goals. His view, although the same in physical description of the desired features in a house, was a much more analytical and practical one. Knowing all the business related functions that would be part of his new job, Priest wanted a house with few corners or nooks. In talking about the house they chose, he said, “One of the nice things about the design is it keeps the group flowing. As one comes in the door, the rest move right on into the next room. There’s always an escape route so some guy can’t get you cornered who is looking for a job for his nephew or somebody.”

Indeed, the house meanders from space to space with partial walls and large walkthrough areas in the main part of the home. There is a wood-burning fireplace in the living-den area. The back wall is an expanse of windows visually bringing inside the densely treed backyard. The décor is an eclectic collection of personal treasures, art, and artifacts from a lifetime of varied experiences and travels. Marietta had furnished the house with the philosophy that “Anything is compatible if you like it.”

Marietta was a constant part of Priest’s life for forty-eight years. She died in 1989 after a courageous battle with cancer. Seeking solace in the most peaceful of the sports he loved, Priest went fishing with a friend of his who was a preacher. The quiet of a lake can lend itself to introspection, and the conversation turned to speculation about remarriage. Priest indicated he thought that
would be disrespectful of Marietta. The preacher ensured him that quite the opposite was true. People who remarried after the death of a spouse were affirming it had been a happy experience that they wanted to have again.

Ann Sparks had worked in the district for many years. She was newly widowed and at that time working as the secretary to the president of Richland College, Steve Mittlestet. Priest, as chancellor emeritus, maintained an office at Richland. He and Ann had many occasions for conversation and they shared many of the same friends. After a brief courtship, the two married on January 23, 1990, less than two years after Marietta’s death. Priest told friends in jest and somewhat in truth, “If someone my age wants to get married, he can’t take a long time making the decision.”

Since Priest’s life with Ann began nearly ten years after his retirement from the district, it gave them a very different framework for their relationship but had the added challenge of a blended family. They live in the same house he and Marietta shared. That is often a difficult setting for a new wife, but Ann seems as at ease there, as if she had personally selected it to establish a home for her new marriage. Priest compliments her for gently placing her personal touch in the décor of the house without eradicating the life that had been shared before. Priest extols her for her loving support and generous heart.

Ann’s adaptability goes without saying. While the work and social demands are not the same as when Priest was chancellor, there are many work related functions they must attend. Ann knows most people in the district, but Priest is still in the spotlight as the founding chancellor. Once, this author apologized for calling her Ann and referring to him always as Dr. Priest. She smiled and replied, “No apology necessary. I’m used to it.” The response was not one of “poor me,” but of gracious understanding of his role and hers in the public arena. Privately they are in concert as a couple. They have differing views on some matters, she being less conservative. Discussions might turn lively, but never destructive. It is apparent they each have great insight into the intricacies of relationships both personal and professional.