A Legacy of Compassion and Scholarship

The family of former CMU President Harold Abel establishes lecture series to study the history of dictatorship, democracy and genocide.
Abel family establishes memorial endowment
New lecture series will focus on history of dictatorship, democracy and genocide

A new $100,000 endowment in memory of former Central Michigan University President Harold Abel will help establish a lecture series focusing on the history of dictatorship, democracy and genocide.

The Dr. Harold Abel Endowed Lecture Series in the Study of Dictatorship, Democracy and Genocide will bring distinguished scholars to campus to discuss the past, present and future of worldwide genocide. The series will focus on the impact of historical events, including World War II, the Holocaust and mass murders in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Darfur.

The gift from the Abel family will honor and memorialize Abel’s 44-year career as an educator, which included a 10-year stint as president of CMU from 1975 to 1985. He passed away in 2002.

New opportunities for global lessons
“Students benefit immensely from having close access to leading scholars in their fields. In addition to gaining a greater understanding of topics in the history of dictatorships, democracy and genocide, our students will observe how leading scholars conceptualize, interpret and conduct research on these topics,” says Tim Hall, history professor and department chairman.

Lesa Smith, director of development for the College of Humanities and Social and Behavioral Sciences, says that in addition to the scholarly benefits the Abel lecture series will offer to students and the entire university community, it also will bring a new distinction to the university.

“The series will signal to the country and the world that CMU is committed to a continued recognition of the importance of understanding the issues of genocide and dictatorship and how these issues affect worldwide democracy,” she said.

An enduring legacy
History professor Eric Johnson worked with Abel during his CMU presidency and says this lecture series is a fitting tribute to his commitment to CMU.

“Harold Abel was an enormously curious and creative person as well as one of CMU’s most distinguished and enterprising presidents. He cared deeply about knowledge that matters and cared deeply about making his university a better known institution on a world-wide basis. He would enjoy seeing this speaker series develop as it will certainly enhance CMU’s reputation in Michigan and more broadly throughout the country and the world,” Johnson said.

Johnson says it’s essential that students learn more about genocide, dictatorships and democracy because history has shown that freedom, tolerance, humanity and kindness cannot be taken for granted.

“Democracy as well as humanity in general are fragile and must be understood and worked at in order to succeed and continue. If societies turn a blind eye to genocide, as so many did in the past and in some cases are still doing today, this always helps the perpetrators and often dooms the victims,” he said.

In establishing an endowment to honor Abel’s commitment to scholarship at CMU, his family wanted to find a way to reach students directly.

“This speaker series continues President Abel’s service as an educator,” says Iris Abel, Harold’s widow. “He believed in education as a lifelong endeavor to understand and improve the lives of others. Genocide is not a historical anomaly but an ongoing horror which can be ended only by the glare of public attention.”

The inaugural Abel lecture will take place at CMU during the 2009-2010 academic year.