

Dr. Christopher N. Breiseth

New president stirs optimism among Wilkes family

A decision was reached in the early spring of 1984 to introduce Wilkes College's then-new president, Christopher N. Breiseth, to Wyoming Valley at a press conference. It is a difficult way for a new administrator to meet his public, especially considering the fact that he is the first "outsider" to even serve as C.E.O. at the 51-year-old college.

Tension was high in the conference room as Breiseth stepped to the podium to answer questions from the 35 media representatives in attendance...and the questions came rapid-fire covering all the tough subjects — enrollment, curricula, financial aid, tuition, community affiliation. Breiseth, with quiet assurance, answered all of them and was able to talk in great detail about the history of the various issues and how they pertained to Wilkes College and Northeastern Pennsylvania. The tension was forgotten. The articulate new president was completely at ease and he put everyone else in the room at ease. Breiseth's easy manner and warm personality had an immediate impact; the introduction was a success.

It's been eight months since that initial meeting and the impact hasn't diminished. In fact before summer was over, Breiseth, his wife Jane, and their daughters, Abigail, 15, Erika, 14 and Lydia, 4, had become an integral part of the community. Attorney Harry Hiscox and his wife, Beverly, both closely associated with Wilkes College over the years, have become friends of the Breiseths. Beverly said, "They bring with them an enthusiasm that is most welcome in this town; they very much want to be part of the community. Chris sees Wilkes needing the community as much as the community needs Wilkes, and that will benefit both."

Breiseth, during those early months, demonstrated something else. He was somehow profoundly aware of almost everything about Wyoming Valley, past and present. His comments and conversation about the college and the community were always in-depth and on target. He was soon comfortably discussing our water problems and their solutions, our growth potential in industrial development, and our educational institutions pooling resources.

Times Leader reporter Steven Hepker wrote, "Breiseth may be the first outsider to serve as president of Wilkes College, but he is compensating. What natives might casually absorb over several years, he is soaking up like a sponge in a matter of weeks. Not all newcomers to Wyoming Valley are so readily embraced as Wilkes' new president has been. It's just that this man makes no bones about reaching out to people."

It was generally acknowledged that in a short time Christopher N. Breiseth had made the transition. He knew and cared about the community and its people and they knew and cared about him.

Then, (in the fall of 1984) it was time to direct his energy and attention toward meeting the academic community — faculty, students and staff. One of the first things he initiated when he moved into Weckesser Hall was an open-door policy; and although that decision has him doing double time on occasion, it remains in effect.

This, however, is not to indicate that he relies only on people visiting him. The president seems to be everywhere on campus. He visits classes, and occasionally teaches as a guest lecturer; he attends department meetings and lectures. He is always present at plays, concerts, student recitals and art shows and he and Mrs. Breiseth visit students (by invitation) in residence halls.

Randa Fahmy, resident advisor for Hollenback Hall, commented on a visit from the Breiseths, "It was exciting for us to have them visit, but we soon realized that this is something very natural for them. Staying in touch with students is, for him, an essential part of his role as president and students are really feeling good about that."

Breiseth is by degree and inclination an historian. He comes to Wilkes from

Sangamon State University in Springfield, Illinois, where he served as chairman of the history department. He holds a baccalaureate in history (with highest honors) from the University of California at Los Angeles, the B. Litt. degree in Modern British History from Oxford University, and the Ph.D. degree in Modern European Intellectual History from Cornell University.

In 1980, Dr. Breiseth took a three-year

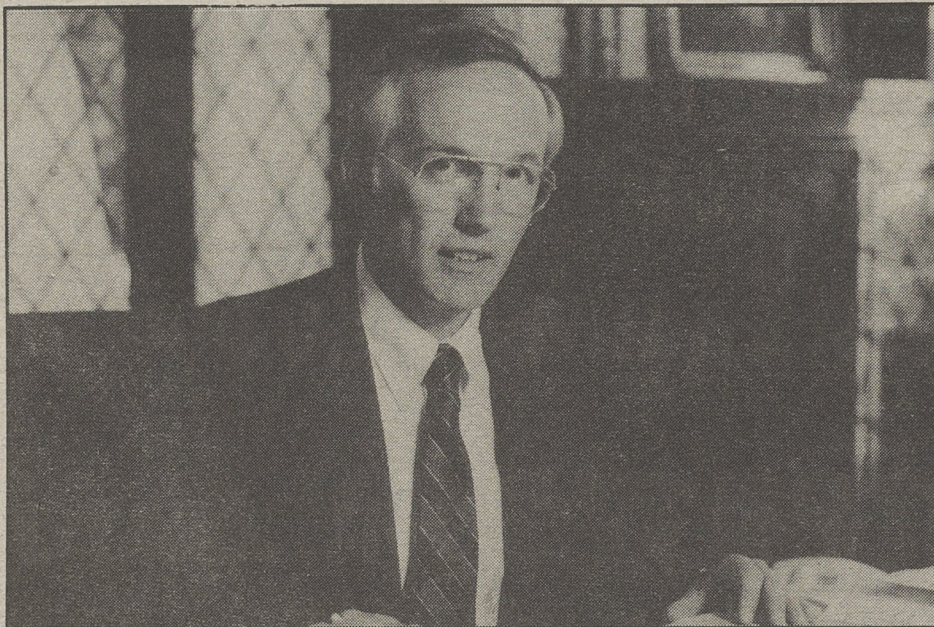
leave of absence from Sangamon to accept the presidency of Deep Springs College. This select liberal arts college, established in 1917, is a working cattle ranch located in the desert country east of the Sierras in California.

Its unique isolated location in the 12-mile long Deep Springs Valley between the Inyo and White Mountain ranges makes the very survival of the college community dependent on the efforts of its members. Students here routinely go from classes in philosophy, art, literature and music to help with chores related to tending 300 head of cattle and 140 acres of alfalfa hay, which help pay the bills.

Breiseth comments, smiling, "The environment from valley to valley is certainly not the same but the concept for education is. The emphasis at Deep Springs was not only placed on providing students job skills in the narrow sense but rather on developing skills in problem solving and interpersonal relations and to combine this with a strong liberal arts program...indeed to give them skills for living in the fullest sense. This is holistic education and is a philosophy to which Wilkes College has always been committed."

Breiseth has extensive experience in higher education both at the academic and the administrative level. Perhaps it is this, combined with the historian's perspective of past and future, that allows him to understand the College and community so well and enables him to initiate plans for Wilkes. Whatever the reason, plans are abundant in his thinking about the future of Wilkes College.

One thing is certain — there is a new enthusiasm on campus inspired by a president who looks ahead with confidence toward the college's next 50 years.



New president

Dr. Christopher Breiseth, newly-appointed president at Wilkes College, relaxes in his office in Weckesser Hall on campus.



Discussing policy

Dr. Christopher Breiseth, Wilkes College president, discusses policy with Peggy Corbett, secretary to the president, in the President's office in Weckesser Hall.