



UCC's Phil Hardy and a Rice student

Listening Post offers cookies, piece of mind

Campus lay minister brings students different approach to spirituality in RMC by opening his ear and listening

Used with permission; Yan Digilov, courtesy, *The Rice Thresher*.

Phil Hardy has been a lay minister at Rice with the Progressive Christians Group for 15 years. Four years ago, he opened up The Listening Post to provide a different kind of spiritual service for the Rice community, offering passersby a plate of cookies, a friendly smile and a open ear. Though it is sponsored by the Progressive Christians, The Listening Post gives no religious advice, but rather works as advertised - as a place to be heard.

Upon entering the Rice Memorial Center, students are often tempted with items to be purchased, causes to be supported or boba teas that can accomplish both. But one table stationed at the entrance of the RMC stands out from all the rest, selling no items, advocating no ideology and offering no Listserv to be added to your already flourishing collection.

The small table, manned every Wednesday from 1-3 p.m. by 72-year-old Philip Hardy, simply offers the passersby a free plate of cookies, an open seat and a welcoming ear to listen. Its title is as straightforward as they come: The Listening Post.

Opening an ear

Hardy's weekly presence on campus is just plain enough to go unnoticed. However, the role that he fills on campus has been recognized by many as invaluable and underappreciated - a friendly person willing to listen.

Hardy began working at The Listening Post four years ago but has been involved with campus life at Rice for over 15 years as a lay minister. After spending most of his life working in the areligious business world, the congenial man has spent his most recent years doing what makes him happiest: helping others.

"I am supposed to be retired," he said, laughing.

So what is it that has kept Hardy from moving to Boca Raton and perfecting his golf swing?

Through his work as a campus minister with the Progressive Christians at Rice, Hardy has found a unique way to make an impact in the lives of Rice University community members.

"College encourages inquiry and doubt, but at a college like Rice, I don't think there is enough spiritual support in the institution," he said.

The way in which Hardy offers his spiritual support, though, may be considered unusual to many. No religious lessons, no guides to spiritual enlightenment and in fact no real predetermined notions are offered at The Listening Post.

Undergraduates, graduates, faculty and staff sit down each week at The Listening Post to chat with a friendly stranger about life's problems, rewards and infinite surprises. But not even an inquisitive journalist will have much luck probing that stranger for an agenda or opinion on any of those matters.

"I believe everyone has their own truth," Hardy said. "If you are Jewish or atheist, who am I to tell you? What special knowledge do I have? I don't have any special insight."

Rather, what he does have is a genuine desire to lend an open ear. But often he finds himself unwittingly put in the position of speaker, as students skeptical about religion ask him about his beliefs.

"They kind of know that [the post is] sponsored by a religious group and they want to discuss that," he said. "They will ask, 'What do you think about the Christian concept of the Trinity?' In that case, I will be honest with my views, but I really want to get the conversation shifted to something they want to talk about."

While it surprises those skeptics that a campus minister would be so uninterested in discussing his personal system of beliefs, Hardy feels that the positive influence of spirituality on a college campus need not be limited to any religious group. Yet those skeptical visitors more interested in ironing out their issues with one particular religious system continue to come. Thus, Hardy believes there is much work that needs to be done to change the landscape of spiritual exploration on campus.

Starting a dialogue

Hardy's 15 years of observation have led him to conclusions that are now being acknowledged by another part of the Rice community.

"I feel that [spirituality] is one part of the Rice community that really hasn't been tapped into," said Martel College junior Selim Sheikh, who runs the Rice Interfaith Dialogue Association. "This all falls under diversity. We have a record number of internationals this year, but I think one thing that is not really focused on is religious diversity."

While multiple religious groups exist on campus, Sheikh's is the only one dedicated to this overlooked form of religious diversity. With about 10 members meeting every Tuesday, this group is one of the rare opportunities students may have to discuss religious questions anywhere on campus.

And some students feel that this is an unfortunate circumstance.

"Outside of any official religious function at Rice, I don't run into [spiritual conversations] much," said Brown College senior Jamie Sammis. Sammis attends weekly meetings with the Progressive Christians group, headed by Hardy. "I think it is unfortunate that there is that perception that I can't have this conversation without having to convert or having a shouting match. I wish there was a more civil openness to talking about these things outside of official religious groups."

Furthermore, Emily Page, Director of the Wellness Center, has identified the need for open spiritual discourse as a health matter. Page is the chair of the Taskforce to Address Spirituality at Rice, a committee that has recently been revitalized to address the accessibility of spiritual outlets on campus.

"When you look at wellness as a holistic model, if one part is lacking it affects everything else," she said.

A 2003 study conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, part of the Graduate School of Education and Information Studies at University of California at Los Angeles, found that modern college students "have very high levels of spiritual interest and involvement. ... Many are actively engaged in a spiritual quest and in exploring the meaning and purpose of life."

Surveys conducted by the Wellness Center confirm that Rice students fall in line with this national trend, but Marissa Howat, Assistant Director of the Wellness Center, believes more needs to be done to encourage spiritual exploration. In particular, there exists one vital statistic that sets Rice students apart when it comes to this issue.

"One of the interesting things is that spirituality ranks high on things that [Rice] students think about, but low on things that student talk about," Howat said. "So a lot of students are privately contemplating their spiritual quest or well-being, but it doesn't seem to be something that is really comfortable or OK to talk about."

For this reason, the man behind The Listening Post believes that the benefits one can receive through spirituality do not have to be exclusively attained through questioning the nature of different gods. Any issue, any thought or any source of uncertainty may at times just need to be heard.

"Maybe listening is just as spiritual," Hardy said. "It is a service. Any service is a spiritual activity."

And listening, he believes, is an act that can be done across religious and sectarian borders. Thus, Hardy has been involved in numerous efforts to change students' impression of religious groups on campus.

"I think on a regular basis [religious groups on campus] keep to themselves, in general," Sheikh said. "I think right now there isn't really an organized entity that on a regular basis promotes interaction between these groups."

Hardy is hopeful that this pattern is slowly changing.

"I believe that all Christian groups and religious groups should work together," he said. "I think that this year, Christians on campus are starting to cooperate more. It is a very encouraging sign."

But The Listening Post remains an entity unique by all standards. While the ideal for Hardy would be for students to take over the responsibilities of The Listening Post, for now, he continues to ward off retirement and provide a service that repays him week after week.

"When I do The Listening Post, I have an inner smile," he said. "I am here just to listen. You can talk about anything you want. I am not going to judge it. I am not going to evaluate it. I am not going to give you advice. I am going to accept you just as you are."