

Besel, Hilmer (1915–2015)

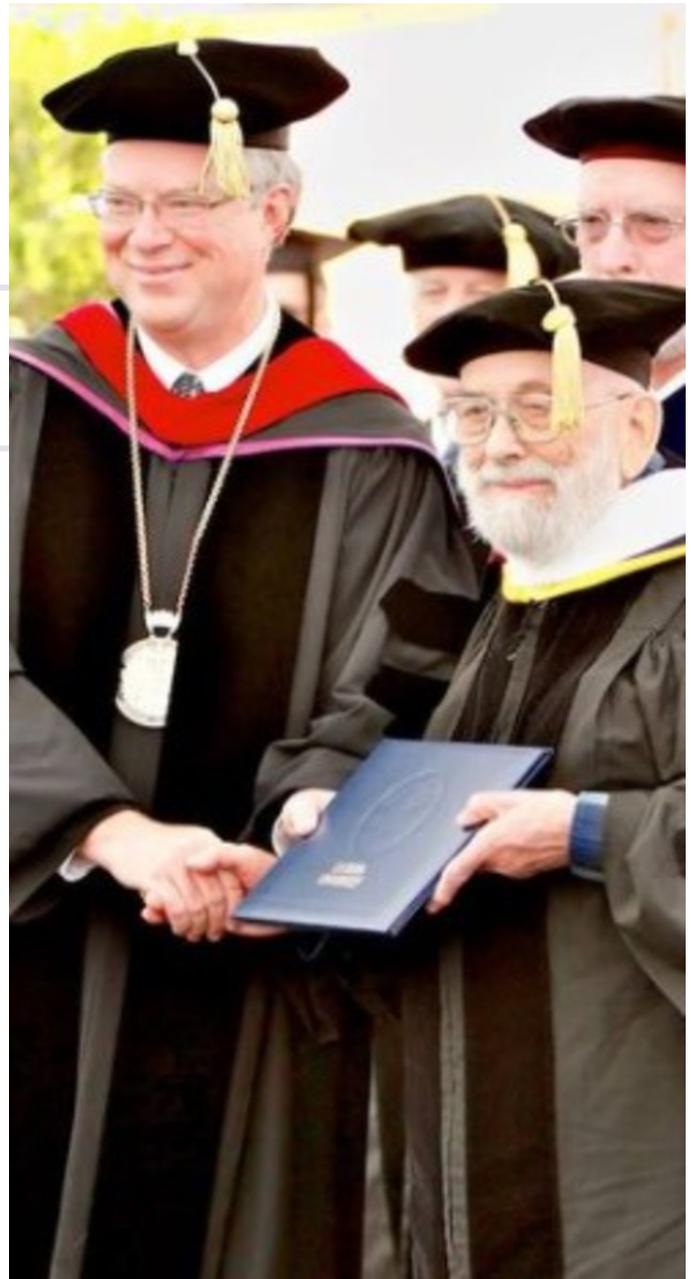
ANDREW HOWE

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Hilmer Besel was a faculty member at La Sierra College (later, Loma Linda University-Riverside and La Sierra University), where he was a campus fixture for 55 years as a professor of mathematics and computer science, starting those two programs.

Early Life

Besel was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on July 2, 1915, in the attic above a store where his parents lived. The son of Germanic immigrants from the Crimean region of Russia, German was his first language. From the beginning, Besel's parents noticed a proclivity for puzzles and mechanical pursuits, including a complex wire puzzle that he could solve as a child. He did well in the British "Spiral System" of mathematics employed in Canada at that point. His father was a carpenter who built Victrola cabinets for the Radio Corporation of America, which helped spark Besel's lifelong interest in radio.¹ As a teen he had a crystal set, which he enjoyed taking apart and then rebuilding.² Due to the Great Depression, grade 12 in Winnipeg's public-school system was suspended. Undeterred, Besel worked over the summer repairing radios, saving up enough money to attend, and graduate from, the nearest private school, one for Jewish students. During the weekend he would walk ten miles one way to visit his old high school mathematics teacher with questions from the textbook that he was now navigating himself:³



Hilmer Besel on right and La Sierra University president Randal Wisbey on left.

From Facebook - La Sierra University.

Marriage and Education

After graduation Besel married Lily Eltzand and opened a radio repair shop 50 miles east of Winnipeg.⁴ When his country came calling at the end of the 1930s, he joined the Royal Canadian Navy and taught at a radio trade school preparing shipboard radio operators for naval service. After the war Besel decided to attend college, moving to Nebraska and matriculating at Union College as a 31-year-old incoming freshman. He graduated three short years later with a double major in physics and mathematics, following up his Bachelor's with a Master's degree in physics, focused upon vacuums and electronic circuitry, at the University of Nebraska, in 1952. The couple moved briefly to California, where Besel worked as a technician at the College of Medical Evangelists before being hired by RCA in 1953 to work in computer development, a cutting-edge field at the time.⁵ Although RCA was headquartered in Camden, New Jersey, the computer that Besel and his team built—employing over eighteen thousand vacuum tubes—was housed just across the river in Philadelphia and, when it was turned on at night, one-third of the lights in the metropolitan area would dim.⁶ Two years later, Besel was offered a supervisory position in electrical engineering at the Naval Ordnance Lab in Corona. As this job entailed doing exactly the same work, in a warmer climate, the couple moved back to southern California, where they would live out the rest of their lives, and where Besel became a U. S. citizen in 1955.⁷

Starting a Department and a Family

A few years later, job possibilities opened up, both at Pacific Union College and at La Sierra College. During this time period, in large part due to Cold War fears following the launching of Sputnik, many universities were building their science programs. The call from PUC involved joining their Physics department, but the one from La Sierra entailed the creation of a mathematics program from the ground up, a challenge that appealed to Besel.⁸ He accepted that job, creating a major that went live during the 1961-1962 school year, a time that also saw him create a curricular track for secondary mathematics teachers and offer a survey course in computer science.⁹ Years later the department created a computer-science major, becoming the first university in the denomination to have a department dedicated to both mathematics and computer science!¹⁰ Then, in 1964, the Besel household more than doubled in size when Hilmer and Lily committed a portion of their retirement savings to bring to the United States three girls from Serbia who needed a home. The Besels traveled to Yugoslavia, overcame numerous obstacles that had been put in place by Tito's government, and committed even more of their resources when Hilmer bought a Volkswagen in Germany, filled it with supplies, and drove it down to Skopje (capital of North Macedonia) to help in the relief effort after a major earthquake destroyed much of the city. Aged 11, 13, and 15, the three girls did not know any English, but both the Besels and La Sierra embraced them, creating a welcoming community.¹¹ In time some of the Besel grandchildren would attend La Sierra University, with one even joining the faculty.

Besel served as chair of the department from his hire until 1975, retiring from full-time employment in 1980 although teaching part-time until 1992.¹² He was a campus favorite of colleagues and students alike: modest, compassionate, and humble. When one asked him a question, they soon learned that it paid to be patient in waiting for the response. Never verbose, Besel would consider each question carefully and then offer a cogent and well-thought out response. He was always generous with his praise and happy for others in their accomplishments. He believed in the concept of university and was a fixture at campus talks in other disciplines.¹³ Lily preceded him in death in 1996, and even though by that time he was legally blind due to progressive macular degeneration, for the next twenty years he walked the short way from his house to the university cafeteria, where he ate lunch every day, adopted by an entire generation of students. As one such student stated: "I like seeing that kind guy every day; I feel like my grandpa is here."¹⁴

Legacy

Besel never completed a doctorate, in part due to the fact that he was constantly supporting younger colleagues, some of whom were sent off to complete their own doctoral degrees. He was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor after retirement and, in 2010, an honorary doctorate in Humanitarian Service at La Sierra University, for not only starting both the mathematics and computer-science programs but also computerizing the campus. A scholarship named in his honor was endowed by former students and colleagues.¹⁵ Hilmer Besel passed to his rest in Riverside, California, on February 10, 2015, at the age of 99.¹⁶

SOURCES

Clarke, Wil. "Memories." Hilmer Besel Memorial Service. March 14, 2015.

vimeo.com/122280721.

Geraty, Lawrence. "Life Sketch." Hilmer Besel Memorial Service. March 14, 2015.

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Guy, Fritz. "Homily." Hilmer Besel Memorial Service. March 14, 2015.

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Personnel File of Hilmer Besel. La Sierra University archives. Riverside, California, U.S.A.

Razzouk, John. "Life Sketch." Hilmer Besel Memorial Service. March 14, 2015.

vimeo.com/122280721.

NOTES

1. L. Geraty, "Life Sketch," Hilmer Besel Memorial Service, March 14, 2015, vimeo.com/122280721.
2. W. Clarke, "Memories," Hilmer Besel Memorial Service, March 14, 2015, vimeo.com/122280721.
3. V. Howe, interview by the author, September 1, 2018.
4. J. Razzouk, email sent to the author, October 30, 2016.
5. Geraty, "Life Sketch."
6. V. Howe, interview by the author, September 1, 2018.
7. Geraty, "Life Sketch."
8. J. Razzouk, "Life Sketch," HilmerBesel Memorial Service, March 14, 2015, vimeo.com/122280721.
9. Personnel File, La Sierra University.
10. V. Howe, interview by the author, September 1, 2018.
11. F. Guy, "Homily," HilmerBesel Memorial Service, March 14, 2015, vimeo.com/122280721. Also Geraty, "Life Sketch" and Razzouk, "Life Sketch."
12. Personnel File
13. Clarke, "Memories."
14. Razzouk, "Life Sketch."
15. V. Howe, interview by the author, September 1, 2018.
16. Geraty, "Life Sketch."

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