

News Release

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Media Contact –Danielle Rush

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Communications Specialist
2300 S. Washington Street
Kokomo, IN 46904-9003
(765) 455-9414
darush@iuk.edu

IU Kokomo teacher inspires students with her passion for education and chemistry

KOKOMO, Ind. — Teachers changed Marcia Gillette’s life. So for the past 35 years, it’s been her turn to inspire others – and she shows no signs of slowing down.

Gillette, 71, a senior lecturer in chemistry at Indiana University Kokomo, wants to inspire her own students.

“It is wonderful to see students succeed, in their studies and in their lives,” Gillette said. “That is what we are about here, helping students succeed. This is the next generation, our future. It’s good to be part of preparing them.”

Gillette planned to study French in college, but chose chemistry because University High School teacher Irwin L. Slesnick made the subject interesting, and encouraged her to pursue it.

She later earned her Ph.D. in chemistry, after studying with Anna Jane Harrison at a women’s college in Massachusetts. Harrison was the first woman president of the American Chemical Society.

“They made chemistry important, and they loved it,” Gillette said. “That combination is pretty convincing. In many ways, it was the people who were in it who made me want to study it. Chemistry is a wonderful, wonderful, interesting area. It’s the basis of everything. It’s hard not to find that intriguing and impressive.”

That inspiration was especially important because in 1963, when she earned her undergraduate degree, women were not especially welcomed in graduate chemistry programs. Gillette went to Iowa State University, and had to earn a master’s degree before she could enter the Ph.D. program. Her husband Bob, who she met while in the program, was not required to earn a master’s degree first.

“It was a different world then,” Gillette said. “Administration figured women were not serious about earning the advanced degrees, they were there to catch a husband, and would quit once they had one. There were some students who were angry a woman would take that spot in the program.”

Now, it’s not a big deal to see women in science classrooms — either as the teacher or as students. Gillette said that is the way it should be.

“I don’t see a reason to favor either men or women in any field,” she said. “Everyone should be in a position where they can make the career choice that is good for him or her.”

Gillette earned her Ph.D. in 1967. She stayed home a few years with her two children, until Bob’s job at Haynes International brought the family to Kokomo. She began her career at IU Kokomo as an adjunct faculty member in 1976.

Gillette teaches chemistry to non-chemistry majors, and to nursing and allied health students. She also teaches sustainability classes and a freshman learning community.

Christian Chauret, dean of the School of Sciences, said Gillette has not only been a teacher, but a mentor and counselor for students.

“Students often seek her counsel and advice, and you can typically find students in her office,” he said. “For many years, before we had professional advisors, Marcia was a very busy academic advisor. Today, she continues to advise students in a more informal way. She always teaches with passion and enthusiasm. Students appreciate her passion and her dedication to student learning.”

That includes students like Joshua Holley, who will graduate with a degree in nursing in May.

“I never had Dr. Gillette for a class, but she helped me with some problems,” he said. “She was more than willing to help me succeed in my studies.”

She is also interested in science students not old enough to attend IU Kokomo yet, serving in leadership roles for the Howard County Science Fair and the Indiana Academy of Science Talent Search.

Gillette remembers participating in science fairs as a young student, including taking projects to the state science fair in Lima, Ohio. She began volunteering as a judge soon after moving to Kokomo, and was instrumental in bringing the county science fair to campus.

“You don’t have to be a scientist in the making to benefit from science fair,” she said. “It teaches how to research, how to write your research, and how to present it to

others. It also teaches critical thinking skills, which can benefit anyone in any field.”

All this, and Gillette has no plans to retire.

“I will teach as long as I am effective,” she said. “I am grateful for this opportunity. I enjoy teaching the students and working with my colleagues. It’s a team effort, and I am glad to be part of the IU Kokomo team.”

Indiana University Kokomo serves north central Indiana.

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