September 12, 2011

Countdown to Riverside City College’s 100th Anniversary

This week, the true story of “Charley the Owl” who made the Riverside City College Quadrangle his home in the mid-1970’s. In his 1979 book, “Backyard Bestiary-Notes of a City Biology Watcher”, Cecil Johnson (RCC Professor of Biology 1952-1990) gave this account of his first encounter with the “Charley”:

“In 1976, a student came running into my office and said ‘Professor Johnson, a whole gang of crows have a big owl down over in the liberal arts quadrangle and are pecking the hell out of him.’ I grabbed a pair of old leather work gloves and raced the short distance to where the attack was in progress. When I got there, a couple of the braver students were shooing the hostile crows away from Charley. I noted he was more in a state of shock than anything else, though his right wing was slightly injured. As I reached down to pick him up I realized he showed none of the usual fear most wild animals do. I was anxious to depart from the scene because a couple of hundred students had gathered around. I stroked his disheveled feathers, cooed softly to him and gently picked up the big (24 inch high) fellow, never realizing at the moment that he would become one of my dearest friends.”

Professor Johnson nursed the owl back to health and released him. “Charley” returned to the Quad where he became a familiar sight, roosting in trees and perching on classroom window ledges overseeing the proceedings. Betty Hosking (RCC Associate Professor of Home Economics 1965-1990) wrote about her experience with “Charley” in Professor Johnson’s book.

“Cecil, this owl you call Charley is a regular visitor in my evening school clothing construction class. I always leave the front door to my classroom open and approximately at nine on the nights I teach, Charley flies through the doorway, hoots a few times, hops up on a lab table and seems to listen to my lecture. He always sits in front of a full length mirror which I have in the room. My students in this class are usually older and were frightened at first but now we all love him. After fifteen minutes or so he slowly hops down and walks out the door.”

Then, in the spring of 1977, “Charley” suddenly disappeared from RCC. The December 19, 1978 issue of “Viewpoints”, the student newspaper, ran an article (reproduced below) revealing the fate of the owl. As Professor Johnson recounted the bad news in his book:

“On May 3, 1977, our dear friend Charley, Bubo virginianus, the great horned owl, ran into a high power line and departed from us. Some evenings I go out front and look up into our great cedar, hoping, just hoping, he might still be there.”

In 1969 Cecil Johnson was RCC’s ninth Distinguished Faculty Lecturer and in 1986 he became the second RCC faculty member to be named to a full professorship. His book, “Backyard Bestiary-Notes of a City Biology Watcher”, is available to check out at the Riverside City College Digital Library. All photos of “Charley the Owl” were taken by “Viewpoints” staff photographer, Paul Eppert.

It is 4 years and 26 weeks until RCC’s 100th Anniversary on March 13, 2016.
The Riverside City College Instructional Media Center is bringing you this five year countdown to RCC’s 100th Anniversary. Our intention is to give everyone a weekly glance at the many people and events that have been a part of the college.

Our thanks go to the RCC Digital Library Archives and the District’s Office of Strategic Communications and Relations for allowing us to use their photo and newspaper collections. Thanks as well to all of the RCC students and Faculty Advisors that were a part of the yearbook and newspaper staffs. Thanks also to Tom Johnson and Gilbert Jimenez who wrote “the book” about RCC’s history. “Riverside City College 1916-1981- A 65 Year History” is available in the RCC Digital Library.

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