A Psychology Alumnus Remembers Life at USU in the Early 1980s

Ken Kaisch was working as a priest at an Episcopal church in southern Utah in early 1980, when he started looking for a way to pursue his dream of getting a PhD in clinical psychology. On a whim, he applied to Utah State University’s Combined Clinical Psychology Program and for a part-time position in the ministry of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Logan. In the end, the timing was right. Kaisch was offered the position through the church and was accepted into USU’s master’s degree program. He and his family relocated from the comfort of their community in Moab to Logan during the summer of 1980. Upon arrival, Kaisch found out he didn’t have some of the basic psychology courses he needed from his undergraduate studies.

“I needed the abnormal psychology undergraduate course,” says Kaisch laughingly. “I needed to take those in my first year to be able to take Psychopathology I and II.”

Many aspects of psychology education have changed over the nearly forty years since Kaisch walked the hallways at USU, but many of the experiences remain. Today, students receive tuition awards and assistantships to help support their education and research. Kaisch remembers the program offering a few part-time assistantships for students, but they were each responsible for covering their own tuition each semester. While working part-time at the local Episcopal parish, Kaisch continued on the path to a PhD. He first completed a master’s degree and then applied to stay at USU for his PhD.

The program told Kaisch that they didn’t traditionally accept students from the master’s program to the doctoral program, so he was surprised when he was accepted. “It was pretty rare to be accepted from the master’s program into the PhD program,” says Kaisch.

Kaisch reminisced about specific instructors, courses, life lessons, and antidotes during his education at USU:

The One about Dr. Helwig and the Street Sweep

“Dr. Andrew Helwig was a professor only for the first year I was at USU. He taught the introduction to counseling class. The very first day, he asked us all to go around the table and describe what we thought psychotherapy was. All of us had wonderful notions about saving the world one person at a time,” Kaisch fondly remembers his professor and colleagues during his first course. The piece that surprised them all was Dr. Helwig’s description of psychotherapy. Dr. Helwig described it as the street sweep cleaning up the messes after a parade.

“I learned so many things during my education at USU,” says Kaisch. “I learned that pretty much every human being was carrying around some kind of major difficulty. Nobody out there is just peachy-keen and has a wonderful life. That’s a fiction.”

Kaisch says Dr. Helwig’s metaphor of the street sweep has stayed with him over the years since graduating and continuing on in private practice because it’s relatable.

“It’s really hard work to clean up those internal messes,” says Kaisch. “If somebody makes a mess in your kitchen, it’s pretty easy to clean up because you can see the mess. You can’t see inside a person’s head or heart and that makes it much more difficult.”
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The Utah State Education Building where the Psychology Department functioned circa 1980. Photo courtesy of USU Special Collections and Archives.

The One about the Beginning of the Community Clinic

“We were told we would start seeing clients at the beginning of our second quarter,” remembers Kaisch.

The facilities and technology at that time were primitive and made it difficult to treat patients. Additionally, the stigma associated with mental health services prevented some from seeking assistance. He and a few fellow students with an entrepreneurial spirit set about opening a location where clients could come to receive services.

“I think Ron Lutz was kind of the spearhead behind it,” laughs Kaisch. “We scrounged up an empty dorm room that was accessible to campus. Then we went to Deseret Industries to furnish it. A couple of chairs, a couch, some lamps, and an end table. That was the first community clinic as far as I know.”

Kaisch remembers the make-shift dorm room lasting for about a year before other rooms were opened up on the fourth floor of the education building on the quad. They began seeing clients in the new rooms and were even able to observe other students with clients conducting interviews, therapy, and testing through one-way mirrors.

The One about Bill Dobson

“Bill Dobson was great. He retired from the Salt Lake City VA and was persuaded to come north and teach. He was a great font of clinical wisdom,” says Kaisch. “He was probably beloved by every student in our section of the program.”

Kaisch remembers his last year of practicum fondly. One day, he arrives to class to find that he was the only student and that he had Professor Dobson completely to himself for a few hours. Kaisch, like other students, carried large cassette recorders to tape sessions with clients for supervision and education services. Dobson asked to try something different during this class and began to play Kaisch’s tapes.

“He punched the tape randomly and stopped it. He listened to a bit of dialogue and asked if I caught that,” says Kaisch. “I didn’t. I was glad there was no one in the room besides us. Then, he punched it again and stopped it. That went on for three or four or five times. Every time, he had seen a place where I could have intervened and deepened the conversation.”

Kaisch was astounded and shocked at not having seen any of those opportunities. That moment shed a light on Kaisch’s limitations, and he suggested that maybe his time would be better spent pastoring full-time. Dobson immediately intervened, explaining that experience allowed him to see and feel moments and opportunities that practitioners learn only through years of practice.

“It was his kindness and compassion with which he dealt with all of us that was marvelous,” says Kaisch tearfully. “I wish he was still around.”

The One about The Study of Learning

“One of the first courses we took was with Grayson Osborne. It was PSY711,” says Kaisch. “We worked through a book called The Study of Learning; I still have it on my bookshelf.”

The course focused on behavioral studies conducted with rats and pigeons. In the last session of the semester, Dr. Osborne encouraged the students to reflect on the term as a whole and bring forward their questions. Kaisch remembers a few students having serious inquiries. Then, the good-humored Kaisch asked a sarcastic question and received the answer of a lifetime.

“I said that I was pretty sure I wasn’t going to be treating any rats or pigeons over the course of my career and asked how I could apply these studies in my clinical practice,” remembers Kaisch.

Instead of blowing off the question, Dr. Osborne turned it into a learning opportunity and detailed a study about human persistence in maladaptive behaviors compared to animals.

“I have used that study at least on a monthly basis with selected clients for the last 35 years,” says Kaisch. “I’m grateful to Grayson for helping me through beginning stats, but also for his willingness to take me and my question seriously.”
“We get to help people for a living. They walk out of our offices often times completely changed. That is enormously rewarding. It was rewarding when I first opened my practice and it is rewarding now, 35 years later.” - Ken Kaisch

Everything He Learned at USU

“I learned how to think like a psychologist and how to do psychotherapy, which is an extraordinarily difficult set of behaviors,” says Kaisch.

The low admission rate at USU was something that enticed Kaisch. He says he received the best hands-on training in psychotherapy and wonderful tutoring from the faculty. Kaisch remembers his time at USU as being the most stressful of his life as he balanced ministerial duties with being a husband and father. He says graduate school was an art and that it took time to decompress from that lifestyle after leaving Logan.

“Utah State’s program is stunning,” says Kaisch. “I compared my training with my colleagues on internship from much more prestigious schools. Utah State offers a superior education in clinical psychology.”

When asked for his advice to current and potential students, Kaisch says that there will be hard times, but that after graduation everything gets better. He says his experiences with graduate school were all worth it.

“You will come out of school with a career that is endlessly satisfying,” reflects Kaisch. “We get to help people for a living. They walk out of our offices often times completely changed. That is enormously rewarding. It was rewarding when I first opened my practice and it is rewarding now, 35 years later.”

Wrapping Up

Following graduation, Kaisch and his family relocated to Southern California. He completed an internship with Patton State Hospital for criminals and eventually opened a private practice. He has used his education to help clients from various backgrounds with many different struggles. He has maintained his faith, and he started a Christian meditation and contemplative prayer group, which grew to include twelve chapters at its height. Today, Kaisch is wrapping up his practice and planning to retire completely in the next few years.

Kaisch recently came to Logan to visit his alma mater and reconnect with the Psychology Department.

“I was just astounded to see that gorgeous four-story building with all the bells and whistles,” says Kaisch about the Sorenson Legacy Foundation Center for Clinical Excellence. “There we were on worn-out furniture in a scrounged dorm room.”

Kaisch reflects on the primitive resources used in his education and the faculty who helped him to become a professional psychologist. He says the faculty could have earned more money serving in private practice, but the professors instead chose to teach and conduct research. While visiting, Kaisch noticed the student directory including photos of each student with their program and research interests.

“All the pictures of the students and their bright, shining faces, their idealism, and their incredibly high intelligence. Their devotion to their studies and to other people,” says Kaisch tearfully. “Then Scott took me and showed me the pictures of the professors. I was moved to tears as I looked at them. These are the kindest human beings that I know. They are devoting their lives to equip others to go out and relieve the extraordinary pain that people carry day after day after day. It was very moving.”