

A Center of Support: Eugene E. Closson

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"In the 1950s and 60s at Graceland there was a tendency to be more in awe of people," said professor of religion **Howard Booth ('60)**. In this context of awe and *Leave It To Beaver* idealism, Eugene Closson was both a real person and one of the main Graceland magic and vision makers of his time.

Closson, who was born on January 2, 1894, and died on February 10, 1974, first became a part of Graceland College history in 1920 when he entered the one-year religious education program that the college had for RLDS appointee ministers. Having dropped out of school earlier to support his family, Closson also enrolled in Graceland's four-year high school academy program. He then earned his A.A. degree in the collegiate program and continued at the school through his junior year. By this time Graceland ran out of classes to offer him and he completed his B.A. in history and his M.A. in psychology at the University of Iowa.

After completing his degrees and serving four years as the first director of youth for the RLDS church, Closson returned to Graceland in 1931 as one of 17 faculty members for 250 students. One of those other 17 faculty members was his wife, **Julia (Travis '26)**, who commenced 15 years as a physical education instructor that same fall. (Their son, 1956 graduate **Jim Closson**, would begin more than 20 years of service at Graceland in 1965 as registrar.) By his second year of teaching in Lamoni, Closson taught an average of 24 class hours, was acting dean of students, was chairperson of about 10 school committees, was in his second year as a 16-year member of the RLDS Lamoni Stake High Council, and managed his own hog farm.

Current Graceland professor of psychology **Tom Freeman ('55)** praises Closson for being an "excellent and very interesting teacher in how he related concepts and made them apply to your life." Freeman, who took all of Closson's classes, states, "He was concerned about me as a person and my development and caused my interest in psychology."



Freeman and others describe Closson as being a motivator, an encourager, a father figure, and having a dominant and dynamic personality. Those qualities carried over naturally for someone who had as early of a classroom and administrative load as Closson did during the heavy part of his career. Closson openly admitted he had another quality, a lack of modesty, when he declared once in a *Tower* interview that "No one did a better job than I did when I was teaching."

In one class Freeman attended, a student grabbed the class's attention by pretending to have an epileptic seizure as was pre-arranged by Closson for the lesson. Freeman also remembers the shocking and extreme experience of going with his mental hygiene class to an insane asylum in Clarinda, Iowa. After the field trip, Closson had the students make a presentation to the campus in which they role-played abnormalities they had witnessed at the institution. Graceland professor of political science and history **Bill Russell ('60)** appreciated Closson for his frankness and candor about sex in some classes he took during a time when people did not talk about the subject.

Not only did "Double E" (as the football players called Closson) attend the games and travel with the team as a reliable cheerleader, but he also made it to almost every football practice to give support, counsel, and keep morale up. Professor Freeman, as a member of the basketball team, remembers when Closson invited the team over to his house for a party where he had posted up pictures cut out of magazines to represent the players. The players were supposed to walk around and figure out which picture represented which player. Everyone had a good laugh when a picture of a wrinkly, droopy hound dog represented a player with a notoriously droopy face who looked sad even when he smiled.

Closson retired as professor emeritus in 1960. Due to his extensive support of Graceland football, basketball, and track, the college announced at the 1968 Homecoming that the new athletic complex, which was completed in early 1969, would be named The Eugene E. Closson Physical Education Center. And even after Closson retired from teaching, he continued to encourage and affect the campus community. When Booth began reconsidering his own commitments to the college shortly after joining the

faculty, it was Closson who listened with understanding and acceptance and advised Booth to explore, contribute, and go wherever the journey would take him.

While teaching at Graceland, Closson had a strong vision and a powerful voice in determining the school's direction. The following is an excerpt from an idealistic September 19, 1947, *Tower* article he wrote about the future of the college:

"Our greatest need is for a sound philosophy — accompanied by the practical demonstration of life at its best. And if we, the faculty and student body of 1947-48, do our part this year, others who enter the 'Old West Door' after us will learn how to profit best by their time spent here and later go out to demonstrate that ours can be a better world without malice or prejudice, where men can live together in prosperity and peace."