UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

February 18, 2014
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Like Father, Like Son

It’s true: the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. In fact sometimes the fruit lands exactly where the plant once stood.

Case in point: Joel Michaelsen, professor of geography at UC Santa Barbara, where he was recently named Interim Executive Vice Chancellor. His father, Robert Michaelsen, spent several years as UCSB’s vice chancellor in the 1970s and ’80s, helping to run the campus from the very same office where he now sits.

The top-floor suite with ocean views is a long way from the cornfields of Iowa that they left behind in 1965, when the elder Michaelsen moved his family cross-country to take a UCSB faculty position — department chair, in fact — in religious studies. Joel Michaelsen had just graduated from high school.

Eager to attend college in California but intent on striking out on his own, the decorated four-sport athlete and former student body president didn’t even apply to UCSB. He instead enrolled in Occidental College, a bit further south, in Los Angeles.

“I had a strong interest in moving away from home, but also, at the time, I thought I wanted to go to a small liberal arts college,” Michaelsen recalled recently. “As it turned out, that was not the ideal setting for me at all. I enjoyed college a lot more once I came to Santa Barbara. It had a more relaxed, open atmosphere, a larger student body and the quality of education was every bit as good if not better.”

A summer class in what was then only a geography program at UCSB — not a full-fledged department — is what wooed Michaelsen away from Occidental and on to

the campus where his father was a distinguished professor and scholar. He never imagined then that he'd end up making a career here.

Graduating in 1969, in the midst of the Vietnam War and the draft, Michaelsen fully expected to be called to serve. Most employers were loathe to hire anyone classified as "draftable," so Michaelsen took a workaday, minimum wage job at a Carpinteria nursery, building greenhouses, planting flowers, installing irrigation systems — and biding his time until he was off to war.

"Eventually they started the lottery for the draft and I got a very high number — very late in the sequence — which meant you weren't going to get drafted," Michaelsen said. "I was so fixated on that for years, I wasn't quite sure how to deal with the fact that I no longer had to worry about the draft. So after being away a year, I came back here to UCSB and entered the teacher training program. I student-taught at Dos Pueblos, back when it was known as 'Hippie High,' and got a teaching credential that I didn't ever use."

Instead, a part-time job at a local movie theater company grew into a management gig that saw Michaelsen first running a Goleta drive-in (now long-defunct), then rotating between the Granada, Arlington and other theaters downtown. He was content, he said, but not happy.

"It finally dawned on me that being a student was the one thing I really enjoyed, so after being out of school for five years or so I applied to grad school in geography at Berkeley," he said. "I thoroughly enjoyed grad school — that's where I really got into climatology — and when I was almost finished with my dissertation I interviewed at UCSB. I came down with no thought that I'd actually get the job, so I was fairly relaxed about it. To my surprise they offered me the position. I finished my dissertation, filed it and two weeks later I was standing in front of a class teaching."

It was 1982. Robert Michaelsen was vice chancellor, a role he had ascended to a few years prior, after a stint as chair of the Academic Senate. As a new geography faculty member in his first (and, it would turn out, last) academic position, Joel Michaelsen said, "My father was at the top, I was at the bottom, and almost nobody made the connection."

Perhaps few people realized the renowned religious studies scholar (Robert) and the newbie professor and climatologist (Joel) were related, but the similarities between father and son soon began to show. The younger Michaelsen became a distinguished

academic in his own right, renowned for his expertise in climatology and climate change. He would also go on to chair his home department and the Academic Senate, just as his dad had before him.

And now he’s in the very position his father held before retiring, looking out the same window at the campus that itself became like family.

“Being at UCSB you feel like you’re part of an organization that is making a difference in the world, is improving, is dynamic and attracting great people,” said Joel, who as interim EVC is helming the search for a permanent replacement. “When I retire it will be the first time in 49 years that there hasn’t been a Michaelsen on the faculty here. This job feels like closing a loop in a sense. And that’s partly why I agreed to do it. UCSB has done a lot for my family. I’ve had a good life here, so it’s nice to be in this position, on my way out, to help with this transition. But if you’d asked me 20 years ago if I was going to end up in here, I’d have said no way.”

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.