

# I n - D e p t h

## Thirty Years of Bridges House Forums

By Luke Peterson  
In-Depth Editor

Three decades have passed since Professor Neil MacGill, then Don of Neill House, held his first "protoforum" for students of the UNB residence community. Originally dubbed the Neill "At Home" series, these weekly meetings - initially intended to facilitate student/faculty interaction - would gradually evolve into a "forum" concept which incorporated a wide array of guests from within and - later - also from outside the university community. On Oct. 13th, 1964, Dr. Theodore Weiner of the Department of Physics, would be the featured guest of the first "protoforum" and in the months to follow everyone from the University psychiatrist to the Resident Musicians would take part in these weekly sessions of informal discussion.

Having first arrived at UNB the very day before lectures commenced in the fall term of 1961, Neil received, what was in his words, "a very speedy appointment" as Don of Neill House after a brief fifteen minute interview with then Dean of Men's Residences Richard Grant. Given this relatively simple transition he made to residence life, Prof. MacGill now expresses a certain degree of surprise that it took so long (three years) to devise the concept of a weekly "in house" discussion group. Once devised, these weekly discussion groups would soon blossom into the current "forum" format which celebrates its thirtieth anniversary this month.

In its infancy, the "at home" series proved to be an unqualified success as students flocked to the weekly sessions which offered both an opportunity for student/faculty interaction in an informal setting and also perhaps more important - a free lunch. Eventually, after a year or two, Prof. MacGill began to serve only coffee and cookies in order to reduce the number of students attending to a more manageable number. This phenomenon did not escape the

attention of former UNB President and biologist John M. Anderson, who in a 1975 letter, expressed his interest in Prof. MacGill's "... evidently correct hypothesis that you could control a student's attendance, moving the latter either upwards or downwards at will, by varying the amount and kind of free calories available".

The summer of 1966, saw Prof. MacGill move from the position of Don of Neill House to that of Resident Fellow of Bridges House. It is this period that marks the birth of the actual "forums", replacing the "at homes" or "protoforums" which heretofore had featured only members of the UNB community. The autumn

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of 1967 saw Mrs. Edith Fowkes, a well known folk song collector, as the first forum guest who did not hail from the university community proper. With Mrs. Fowkes, began the tradition of inviting visiting lecturers of the university back to Bridges House, for an evening of discussion, after they had finished their public appearances. A glance at the list of eminent public figures who have lent their presence to the forums over the years, tends to affirm the efficacy of Prof. MacGill's recruiting method; forum guests have included: Dean Rusk, U.S. Secretary of State during the Kennedy administration; General William Westmoreland, former American Army Commander in Vietnam; Lord

Ballantree, former Governor General of New Zealand; and Sir Robert Thompson, head of the British Advisory Mission in Vietnam.

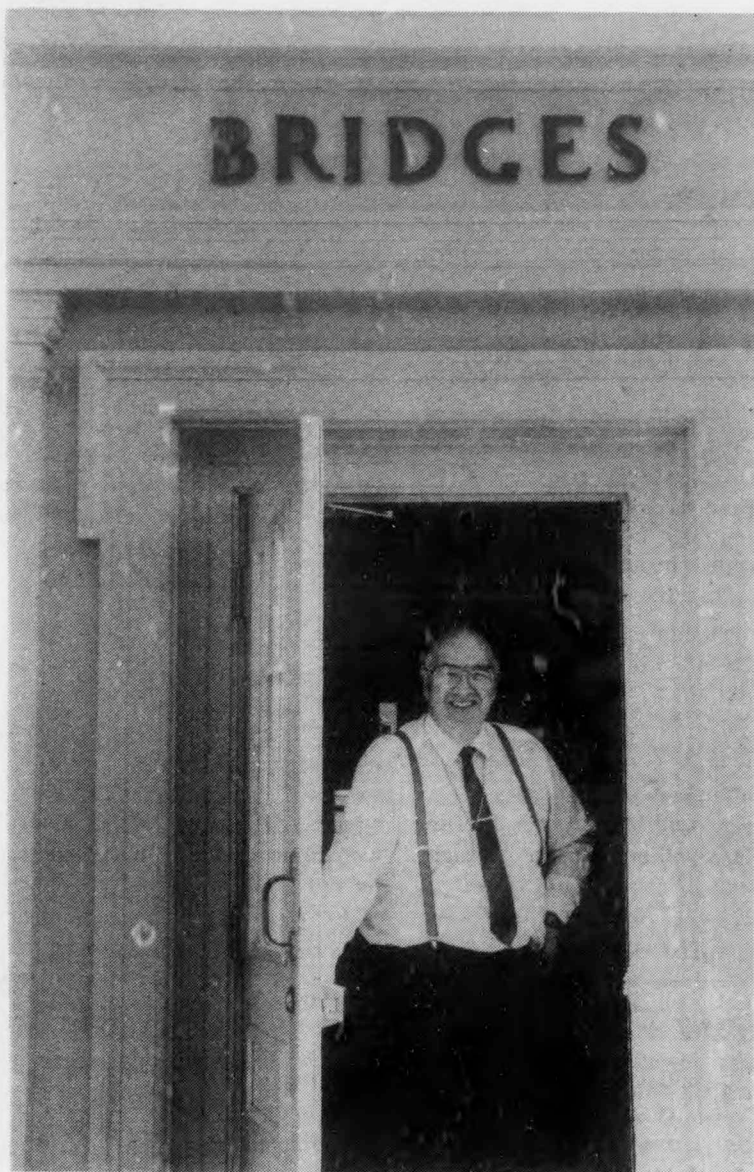
Over the course of several summer conversations with Prof. MacGill, the amiable philosopher recounted some of the more memorable moments of the past thirty years' forums and also discussed the guiding philosophy behind the forum concept. When asked if the forums, particularly those with such titles as "Recreational Mathematics" and "Bertrand Russell on Records", are a subtle - rather sneaky - attempt to educate unwitting students when they have their "guards down" in a relaxed setting, Prof. MacGill chuckled and, while dismissing the notion of any treachery on his part, nonetheless tended to concur that one of the fundamental goals of the forums is to broaden the intellectual horizons of the participants:

"The intention certainly was to engage people in fairly intellectual discussions by and large, although the topics varied quite a bit. They were not all completely intellectual.

'Recreational Mathematics' in fact was a thing (Professor) Bill Chernoff did several times. He had a collection of puzzles ... which involved mathematical principles ... which seemed to keep people's minds off examinations, which was what we used them for. But I think in general, there was certainly the idea of educating people, but it was also broadening their education because there was the hope that people would come to (forums) that were not just (related to) their particular faculty."

"Also, I've always tended ... to try to get across the idea that these things can be enjoyable and interesting and that even if you are not just doing them to get good grades ... you can (still actually) enjoy doing intelligent things. Students have quite often remarked to me that they learned more at the forums than they did in any of their formal courses. I've never been sure whether this is a compliment or not."

In addition to broadening the forum participants' intellectual and



Professor Neil MacGill and his home of the last 33 years:  
UNB's Bridges House

Paul Mysak photos

cultural horizons so as to "increase their self-fulfilment by uncovering interests and talents they did not suspect they might have", Prof. MacGill also strongly believes that a student's broadened mind can benefit society as a whole: "... to allow people to play their role as citizens in a democracy that depends on widespread knowledgeable involvement for its success. The current trend in the Residences is to concentrate on getting people through their particular courses and programmes and helping them to stay free of A.I.D.S., etc., but I feel this is too narrow a view of human nature."

While students often reap immediate benefits and new interests from the forum sessions, often information culled from a forum long gone by can prove to have a profound effect on a former student. A note left for Prof. MacGill last summer by a Bridges House alumnus of more than twenty years ago, attests to the usefulness of the forums: "Those evenings at your apartment listening to music or guest speakers left a lasting impression. I had gone on to get a Ph.D. in Physics (Geophysics) from U. of T. and now live in Houston where I am a partner in an international oil and gas consultancy specializing in geophysical exploration. You might find it interesting that one of my first exposures to Geophysics was through Sir Edward Bullard, whom, I believe, you had as one of your Thursday evening guests in 1970 (71?) when he was on campus for a lecture series. You probably thought we never listened, but we did."

While having the luxury of a prominent personality as a forum guest could be counted upon to garner good student attendance, Prof. MacGill is quick to acknowledge that at times student interest flagged considerably. In fact the amazing longevity of the

forum concept is due in large part to Prof. MacGill's determination not to be dissuaded by a dismal turnout:

"One secret of keeping the thing going for so long was not to be discouraged by small numbers. I noticed that many of the colleagues I had in other houses over the years would embark on splendid projects and then give up when too few people came. While I've often been depressed by such results, I've found that the numbers often increase inexplicably if one keeps going, though the reverse also happens. For the same sort of reason I've also learnt to avoid planning too far ahead, so that if something doesn't work I can change direction for a while and try something with more appeal. Also, I've tried to remember that doing something for just one person can be good enough."

While the forums have endured some lean times, they nonetheless have continued to flourish, perhaps due in large part to Prof. MacGill's continued efforts to keep the discussion topics timely (and at times controversial). Sample discussions over the years having included everything from "Should Bridges House be Coeducational?" to "Abortion: A Question of Life", Prof. MacGill is quick to concede that he has often sought to use the forums as a venue in which the issues of the day can be openly discussed and debated:

"Yes, that certainly is a part of it. Those kinds of things that are seen on 'the news' And ... for quite a number of years whenever there was an election, either federal or provincial, we've invited all the candidates in for a debate and that has become something of a tradition. Also we've had forums whenever there was some sort of crisis anywhere in the world: we've tended to (focus) on that and bring people in. There's quite a range

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Students drink coffee??, while attending a forum. The session was devoted to UNB economics student Greg Chernoff's journeys in Ukraine while on an exchange program