

BFR: The Man Behind Your Practical ECE Career

Lab courses are an essential part of our ECE education here at Purdue. Most of us would have taken (or will take) two or more such courses (for example, EE207 and EE208). It's not uncommon to overhear people tell stories about how bad a time they had taking these labs, since they're usually lengthy, demanding and sometimes downright impossible at 7:30 in the morning! I myself was unfortunate enough to have had EE207 and EE208 both as 7:30's, and believe me, I could go on complaining all day about my 'troubles in the labs of EE!' The Electrical Engineering department's labs have been bringing out the practical sides of every electrical (and computer) engineering student for years now. We, as students in the ECE school, sometimes do not appreciate fully the hard work, organization and supervision that goes into the teaching of all our lab courses.

Meet Barret F. Robinson (who likes to shorten his name to BFR). Chances are, you've already met him, but wouldn't recognize him now. He's probably the humble, silver-haired man dressed in a suit that walked into your *first* EE 207 lab in high spirits, welcoming you to the practical and experimental aspects of your curriculum. Mr. Robinson is the coordinator of undergraduate labs in the ECE, and provides the driving force behind the lab courses we take. In Barret's own words, his job is to "work with the faculty, teaching assistants, lab coordinators and supporting staff to ensure that topics are properly covered and that experiments are properly executed." Barret has a very interesting history behind him. Though born in Columbus Ohio, he grew up in northern Indiana, where he was educated up to high-school level. Soon after, he joined the United States Air Force, where he initially worked a desk job as a typist. Barret then served abroad in Morocco, for 27 months, where he helped organize the deployment of Bomber Wings for the Strategic Air Command.

Barret had originally planned to be a pilot, and even passed the Air Cadets test but was too young to be listed. After Morocco, Barret was posted at Little Rock Air Force Base, Arkansas. After taking leave from the Air Force, Barret decided to join the BSEE program at Purdue, taking the Research and Development Option that was available at the time, and graduated in 1962. From 1962 to 1965, Barret worked as a National Science Foundation Fellow and a Graduate Research Assistant in communications research in Electrical Engineering while pursuing an MS in mathematics. Before returning to Purdue as a staff member in 1970, Barret taught high-school mathematics, wrote math textbooks and taught demonstration classes in math K-12.

In 1970 Barret joined the EE staff as a Research Engineer (half-time) at the Laboratory for Applications of Remote Sensing and (half-time) assisted Professor John C. Lindenlaub in the development of the undergraduate labs. In addition to supporting the laboratories, Barret has performed sponsored research and private consulting for several companies, such as NASA, USDA, NSF, NIH and the United Nations. His research interests have also found him devoting his time to the Biomedical Engineering Center and MED Institute and the Purdue Research Park. In recent years, he has devoted most (if not all) of his time to the ECE laboratories.

Other than playing roles as a supervisor, coordinator and overall nice-guy, Barret is the instructor for EE402, as well as EE457. For all the readers that have not reached EE402 as of yet...you too will suffer! Actually, EE402 is possibly the best course an EE can take here at Purdue. It's the senior design project, and tests your potential for teamwork, application of the material you've learnt over your years as an engineer and overall resourcefulness. Barret insisted that I mention it being a consortium with Professors

Ogbron, Lee, Furgason and TA's Kulkarni, Pande and Bajpai. When asked if he had ever witnessed any 'emergency' situations over his long and fruitful career as coordinator of the labs, Barret mentioned only practical jokes that had backfired upon their would-be jokers. Other than that, he's only encountered episodes of epileptic seizures in students; those too were not serious. So, kudos to Barret and his team for maintaining such a perfect safety record over all these years at the ECE labs!

With the reputation Purdue's ECE program has throughout the world for excellence in teaching and research, I was curious to find out how people like Barret help bring about *and* maintain it. "We do a better job than most other schools do, because of the more hands-on experience we offer students here."

He feels that even though all Big Ten EE programs deserve respect, Purdue still offers the best degree around. "Perhaps Illinois (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) has an edge over us with equipment, but we still build the best concepts", Barret maintains with a smug grin. A very interesting fact Barret mentioned was that most incoming graduate students from other universities find it difficult to cope (with) and teach the introductory microprocessors course here, EE362.

"We usually end up having to assign a grad student that was an undergrad at Purdue, with senior undergraduate students as teaching assistants".

Barret also feels that Purdue maintains a very strong curriculum for those interested in communications, quoting EE438 and EE440 as being difficult, but excellent courses. "We receive complaints from students about our equipment being old, but what can't be denied is that experimental *concepts* are much more important."

BFR, in all his humility and simplicity, can be quite hard to figure out as a person himself. He's not very talkative about personal matters, and all I could find out was that he is married, with 2 sons, and even has a grandson. Now at the ripe age of 65, Barret F. Robinson can look back at his years at Purdue and feel more than proud. Countless ECE alumni owe a great part of their experience at Purdue, and possibly their careers today to people like him, and zeal and energy people like him provide Electrical and Computer Engineering at Purdue with today, in true Boilermaker engineering tradition.