Dan Silver: Dean's Lecture, November 10, 2009

I am honored to introduce to you, my friend and colleague Professor Daniel Silver, of the University of South Alabama Department of Mathematics and Statistics, who will be our speaker this evening.

It occurred to me the other day that I have known Dan for nearly 31 years. It is difficult to describe someone whom you have known that long, but let me try.

My first recollection of Dan was in the kitchen of the Math Department at Yale University in the fall of 1978. Dan was talking (well complaining, really) to one of his classmates about his teaching assignment for that semester. It seems that his calculus class was rather large. Dan's concern was not for himself but rather for his students. Dan felt that students in the larger section would not receive the attention that Yale students would deserve. It was an encounter that I remember well. It taught me that we, as graduate students, needed to behave as responsibly towards our students as the full-time faculty might.

Dan and I took a few courses together in graduate school. They were taught by the man who would become Dan's Ph.D. advisor, Pat Gilmer. Currently Pat is a Professor at LSU. At that time Pat was a big bushy beard and head of curly black hair with a quivering voice who seemed to know all that there was to know about low dimensional topology. In thinking back to those classes there are several things to be pointed out. First, these courses shaped the way that both Dan and I do mathematics to this day. Second, the topics that were being taught were not discoveries from the last century or even from 20 years ago. They were results that been proven in the last few years and that became the technical foundation of all future studies in 3 and 4 dimensions. Third, while sitting in those classes, I never imagined that my future day-to-day colleagues were sitting with me.

I saw Dan about 10 years later at a week long conference in England. In addition to full English breakfasts, thick custards, pints of beer that cost a pound, backgammon, and mathematical conversations that went well into the night, there was one event that stuck in the memory of all of the participants. It rained and never stopped. This was England after all. Dan happened to have a birthday during the conference, and he earned one of his most prized possessions: a birthday card signed by all of the heavy-weight mathematicians in our field.

When I joined the faculty here 20 years ago, I was actively recruited by Dan Silver. I learned an important thing about Dan and his wife Susan Williams during my first few years here. They are people who actively work to make Mobile a better place. Dan and Susan are members of the Mobile Chamber Music Society who put a great deal of work into that organization, and make sure that top-quality chamber music groups are brought to enrich the cultural life of the community. During my first few years here, Mobile had an alternative newspaper that some of you will remember: The Harbinger actively campaigned for more open government, against corruption, and for making Mobile a greener and healthy community. Among Dan's contributions at The Harbinger was a comic strip that featured Fenton Mallard a duck who still holds a sign that says "Free speech isn't cheap." In the strip,

Mobile's Industrial Development Board became the "Industrial Depravity Board." And his Judge Ham campaigned against the horrors of sexual humor-ism.

Dan's cartooning influences include George Harriman (Krazy Cat) and Walt Kelly (Pogo). He plays cello (electric and acoustic) and guitar (electric and acoustic). His tastes in music range from a deep and unwavering respect for Johan Sebastian Bach, no opinion whatsoever about the Rolling Stones, and a not-so-secret love for Texas blues man Johnny Winter. I am fairly sure that he uses the electric cello to play what can only be described as "dirty-ass rock and roll." Susan has a low tolerance for such things, and Dan wears headphones while he plays. His favorite movies range from "Hillary and Jackie" to "Who Framed Roger Rabbit," anything by the Marx Brothers, "Ratatouille," and of course the cerebral "Zoolander."

Dan has a refined sense of right and wrong. He believes that it is morally wrong to let the opportunity for a joke to remain unspoken.

I invite you to visit his web page to see a video of him and Andrzej Wierzbicki duplicating Peter Guthrie Taite's smoke ring experiments with toxic gasses. Taite, it seems, believed that atoms were knotted vortices in the aether that comprises space — a beautiful theory that is disturbingly wrong from many perspectives. Yet we now know that models of loop quantum gravity contain aspects of knot theory at its foundational core.

He is indeed a world class scholar. He has given plenary lectures in Japan, at the Banff Research Center, and Oberwolfach — a German research center nestled in the black forest. He has given lectures and mini-courses at MSRI, SUNY Stony Brook, The George Washington University, and the University of Maryland. His work straddles two distinct areas of mathematics: topology and dynamics. He and his wife Professor Susan Williams have found deep, interesting, and important connections between these areas.

Dan has published research articles, survey articles, and book reviews in the most widely read venues in our discipline. My colleagues in the mathematical sciences recognize and respect for the University of South Alabama, is due in no small part because of the work of Professor Dan Silver.

I give you Dan Silver.