

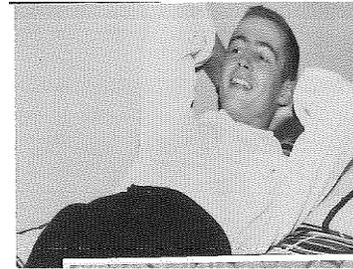
Risser, Paul Gillan (September 14, 1939—July 10, 2014)



On July 10, 2014, Grinnell College lost one of its distinguished graduates and our friend and classmate, Paul Gillan Risser. He was Vice Chair of the College's Board of Trustees, which he joined in 2007 and which he also served as the Chair of its Search Committee that selected Raynard S. Kington as the College's President.

The current Chair of the Board, Clint Korver, '89, said, "Paul was a stalwart of the Board" and "an extraordinarily accomplished scientist, administrator, and champion of the value of a liberal arts education. His high level of intellectual energy and demonstrated commitment to excellence in all aspects of his work were inspirational and contagious; he will be missed."

As a Grinnell undergraduate, Paul was a Biology major and a member and captain of the cross country team and Honor G. He was a resident of South Younker Hall, serving as its President and as a member of the Council of House Presidents (CofHP) his senior year.



For our 50th reunion, Paul recalled the College "as a place of real community where for the most part there were relatively mild differences of views and perspectives; some of us were passionate about circumstances or issues, where we pursued causes but we looked as much inwardly as outwardly; we generally worked hard and all rejoiced in a liberal arts education as we pieced together its personal value; career choices were of interest but not of desperate concern; and faculty frequently were heroic in their support of us as students and really as friends."

After obtaining his Grinnell B.A. in 1961, Paul's next stop was the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he earned the M.S. degree in Botany and Ph. D. in Botany and Soils in 1965 and 1967 respectively. He then returned to his native Oklahoma to serve for the next 14 years (1967-1981) on the Botany faculty of the University of Oklahoma in Norman, where he became a full Professor and Chair of the Department of Botany and Microbiology.

In 1981 Paul entered university administration as Director, Illinois Natural History Survey, University of Illinois (1981-1986). He then moved on to Provost and Vice President for Research and Academic Affairs, University of New Mexico (1986-1992); President, Miami University, Miami OH (1993-1996); President, Oregon State University (1996-2002); Chancellor of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education (2003-2006); and Chair and Chief Operating Officer of the University of Oklahoma Research Cabinet.

Upon Paul's passing, an official of the State of Oklahoma said Paul "was a great Oklahoman and educator who worked tirelessly and selflessly to better the lives of Oklahoma's young people" and was "a strong and visionary leader whose work improved college enrollment and graduation rates."

Paul also served as Acting Director of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History; the National Science Foundation's Program Director of Ecosystem Studies; and president of three national professional organizations: the American Institute of Biological Sciences; the Ecological Society of America and the Association of Southwestern Naturalists. He chaired the Board of Environmental Studies and Toxicology of the National Academy of Science and of the Institute of Ecosystem Studies of New York and was the Secretary General of the Scientific Committee on Problems of the Environment. Paul was a fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and was an advisor or consultant with many prestigious scientific organizations (including the National Science Foundation and the National Academy of Sciences) and agencies conducting scientific research and public policy development (including the Department of Energy, the Environmental Protection Agency and the National Park Service).

He also was a Trustee of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, the Executive Director of EDGE, Oklahoma's economic development organization, and Chair of Oklahoma's P-20 Council.

All of these scientific endeavors drew upon his research interests in the structure and function of grassland and forest ecosystems, environmental planning and management, landscape ecology and global change. Throughout his career Paul authored or edited six books and published more than 100 chapters and scientific papers in referred journals. These many accomplishments were recognized in 1994 by Grinnell's awarding him the honorary Doctor of Science degree.

On November 17, 2002, Paul spoke on "The Danger of Fragmentation," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7TeGa6YX2g>, for the TEDxOUSalon, a program of Oklahoma, self-organized events to share a TED-like experience. He spoke about the need to understand the fragments of any situation or problem and how they relate to the whole in terms of a theory. For making decisions, we need to understand the fragments (what, how and why) and how they relate to the whole in terms of a triple bottom line: profit, people and planet.

For many years Paul battled cancer, which caused the amputation of his left arm in 1999 and which eventually caused his death. In his last days while working on his laptop computer in his hospital bed, he said, "So much to do. So little time."

At Paul's memorial service at the First Presbyterian Church of Norman, his twin brother and fellow Grinnell classmate, Jim Risser, recalled their maintaining a special relationship even though miles apart after College. For example, more than once they coincidentally exchanged the same birthday or Christmas gifts, and when Jim was in an airplane accident, Paul without any knowledge of the incident called their mother to ask what had happened to Jim.

The program for the memorial service quoted this beautiful poem by his wife Les composed for Paul on Valentine's Day of 2014, ""I love you for your integrity, honesty and commitment to always doing what is right.//I love you for your generosity whether in sharing of your ideas or the sharing of your material resources.//I love you for always endeavoring to make things better, no matter how insurmountable the challenges may be.//I love you for being an idea-man, a doer, and a humble man of great accomplishments.//I love you for your indefatigable will to 'keep on going.'//I love you for loving my daughters and making them 'our' daughters.//I love you for adding four wonderful sons to my life.//I love you for the gift of your mom—a true gift in my life.//I love you for being open-minded, tolerant and free-spirited.//I love you for believing that is equally important to work hard and play hard.//I love you for showing me the world.//I have loved being 'us' every moment of every day, of every year.//I love you P.G."

Paul is survived by Les; twin brother and classmate, Jim (Barbara); brother Ted (Trudy); sons David (Holly), Mark (Yola), Stephen (Kelly) and Scott (Hilary); stepdaughters Amy (Randy) and Sarah (Bob); and 14 grandchildren.

In celebration of Paul's life and contributions to education, the Paul G. Risser Scholarship Fund has been created at the University of Oklahoma. Contributions to the Fund may be made through the University of Oklahoma Foundation, 100 Timberdell Road, Norman, OK 73019.