

Life story of Ronald G. Bodkin

Ronald Bodkin was born in 1936 in Pennsylvania, USA, coming to Canada in the sixties and becoming a Canadian citizen in 1973. Now 68, Ron has been retired for almost three years from the position he held with the University of Ottawa for over twenty-five years.

Raised in the Philadelphia area of the United States, Ron attended a Quaker school during his youth, going to college afterwards and completing his graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania. After a three-year stint at Yale he decided, in 1965, to come to Canada, to the University of Western Ontario, where he took up a position in what was then called the Department of Economics and Sociology.

Ron has been involved with higher education all his working life, first at Yale, and going on to become a Professor of Economics at Western. Following two years in a government post in Ottawa with the Economic Council of Canada, managing a large-scale econometric model project, he moved officially with his first wife to Ottawa where the children had become settled in school. Now at the University of Ottawa, he continued his career as a Professor of Economics.



Ronald Bodkin Graduation photo, 1957.
Swarthmore College. Pennsylvania.

His list of publications over this time includes about ten books and fifty publications. Sabbaticals from work have enabled him to return to Yale, and to live and work abroad for a time in such places as Geneva and Paris, and closer to home in Los Angeles and Seattle. It was at the University of Washington in Seattle that he learned in depth about the economics of gender, returning to the University of Ottawa to develop a course of his own and offer it to students.

Married for the second time, after his first marriage ended in divorce, Ron now looks upon this relationship – “meeting and marrying” his current partner – as the most significant happening in his lifetime. His family now includes offspring—five altogether—from both their previous marriages, living in cities across Canada and the United States, and grandchildren, as well as his mother and her partner. Another daughter, manic-depressive, ended her own life several years ago – a tough time, he admits, and a tragic occurrence, but he seems to have found his way through this and other rough times in his life.

It was not his choice to retire, and at 39, when he had taken out his contract with the university, in 1975, it had not occurred to him to question the condition of mandatory retirement in the year he would turn 65. Several years before the time came, he had begun to search for a position in American universities mainly, where mandatory retirement was not an issue. He came close to being hired, he says, but nothing worked out. His partner still works

in Ottawa, so moving away would not necessarily have been the answer to this life transition Ron was facing.

In preparation for his retirement he and his partner designed and equipped a room in their home as a study, bringing from his university office as many books as it would hold. He still does a bit of consulting, and this summer has been teaching the course, *Economics of Women's Issues*, that he designed almost ten years ago. Although he travelled a great deal during his active career, now that he is retired he does less professional travelling. He makes regular trips to another city to attend board meetings for a national research foundation, but his attendance at economists' meetings and conferences have dropped off.



Ronald G. Bodkin. Photo Sue McPherson 2004

“When I first retired,” he says, “I was dragging because I really did miss this,” but over time, through making adjustments in how he spends his time and in his leisure activities, he has adapted to retirement, although it is obvious how much his work has meant to him. I asked if he felt fulfilled and he responded, “By and large, yes. I’ve been able to do the work I’ve wanted to do, I’ve met some wonderful students along the way. I have a loving and delightful wife and yes, I would

say I feel fulfilled. . . I ramped up the bridge a bit,” he says, “and I play about the same amount of tennis that I always did. . . . I get five journals a year – about twenty issues, so there’s plenty of stuff for me to read, and the nice thing about retirement is that I’ve been able to do more reading.”

Shortly after he retired his mother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. A widow, she is now 92 years old and lives in Arizona with her partner of several years. Despite not liking the idea of having to retire, he is glad in a way to have fewer commitments now, enabling him to go to Arizona to visit and assist with her various matters of estate as required.

I asked Ron what his goals in life had been in his younger days, and this is what he said:

My studies have always been important to me because I knew that was how I’d earn my living, and they interested me, by and large, so I went to this Quaker boarding school that was quite academically-oriented, and I worked hard on my studies and I did reasonably well. . . . I think I always wanted to be a professor. In fact I remember in grade school one of the nicknames of my classmates for me was professor. So I always was oriented that way.

Ron had to retire at age 65 and says now, “I don’t want others to have to go through what I had to go through. . . . It was a negative experience emotionally and financially – not so much professionally because I still got my research done, and basically I’m finishing up on a couple of projects and then I suspect once I finish those off I won’t be undertaking any new research.” Besides defending the economics of choosing when to retire, from his own perspective and that of women who joined the workforce after raising a family, he tells this story from his youth of what it means to him:

I went to a boarding school in Pennsylvania, and the year that I went into the upper school – grades ten, eleven, twelve – they still had an initiation run by the upper class men. They put us through the indignity of running courses – races – in our underwear, climbing up a greased pole and stuff like that – just a little bit of hazing – minimal hazing. It was 1951 and this was controversial even then. And so I was on the student council later that year and basically I did what I could to abolish it. As some people said, ‘Don’t you want to get back at the younger guys for what happened to you,’ and I said ‘No, I want to abolish the thing. I think it’s silly. It doesn’t contribute to school spirit. I think it’s just a bit of foolishness that we can do without.’ And the interesting thing is they did abolish it and we were the last class that had the benefit of this charming practice. And I was very pleased about it because I really thought it was silly and if anything it contributed to bad feelings. You know, there was no great tragedy that year. It was confined to the campus – the boys’ end of the campus. We weren’t humiliated in front of the young ladies (it was a co-educational boarding school). But basically I was happy enough to see it go. I see mandatory retirement in much the same position – that it’s basically an infringement of human rights, and I would be happy for my younger colleagues if they did not have to go through this.

Life story of Ronald Bodkin written by Sue McPherson following interview in 2004.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.

The Dilemma of Mandatory Retirement. Sue McPherson writer, website design