The numbers presented May 23 during a special ceremony honoring Don Pfaff’s 50 years on campus were staggering. Over 100 semesters of teaching during his 50-year career as a professor of mathematics at Nevada, Pfaff has:

- Graded close to 60,000 assignments;
- Taught close to 20,000 students;
- Spent close to a million minutes doing mathematics instruction to students;
- Established the faculty record for longevity for the University of Nevada, Reno and the Nevada System of Higher Education as the longest-serving professor ever.

And yet, what became clear during the two-hour gathering in the Joe Crowley Student Union Ballroom attended by many of Pfaff’s former and current colleagues, friends and family, was what a profound influence he has had on the people he has met.

First and foremost, speakers stressed, Pfaff has always been an extraordinary teacher. College of Science dean Jeff Thompson noted that for all of the truly mind-boggling numbers associated with Pfaff’s tenure, “the time Don is most known for … is educating.”

Steve Maples, director of admissions, remembered how Pfaff’s influence went far beyond the classroom. Several years ago the University had begun a program to help at-risk enrollees succeed on campus.

To teach math, Maples found a ready volunteer in Pfaff.

“Sure, I’d love to … sounds like a great program,” Maples remembered Pfaff saying. “Don taught them all kinds of different things before they came into college.”

Because of Pfaff’s teaching, Maples said, “Students in that program had higher graduation rates than the general student body … Don was a major factor in that.”

Harvey Lambert, a former colleague of Pfaff’s in the math department, noted Pfaff’s many “idiosyncrasies,” including Pfaff’s well-known penchant for Hawaiian shirts.

But that wasn’t the only colorful thing about Pfaff, Lambert said. “He used to walk around with his pocket lined with felt-tipped pens,” Lambert said. “He would say, ‘You’re just jealous because I’ve got flair.’”

Bruce Blackadar, another longtime math professor, recalled the kindness Pfaff had shown him when Blackadar first arrived on campus in 1975.

“He was very generous and gracious to me,” Blackadar said. “Don gave me his office and moved into what was basically a cubicle with the T.A.’s.

“I came to realize this was typical of Don” he added.

Former student Darren Ripley—a math instructor at The Davidson Academy of Nevada—said that within five minutes of taking his first class from Pfaff, “I was completely be-dazzled.”

Ripley said that in 22 years of knowing Pfaff, he had taken “15 courses … 50 or 60 exams … heard 630 bad puns … 115 decent puns … and 43 really good ones” from Pfaff.

Out of the “782” times Ripley had asked for Pfaff’s advice over the years, “780 times I followed it and the two times I didn’t … it ended badly.”

For his part, Pfaff, who spoke at the ceremony’s conclusion, said he “never dreamed something like this would ever happen.”

And then, in typical Pfaff fashion, he smiled a bit mischievously, patted his breast pocket and pulled out a piece of paper.

“But just in case,” he said, drawing great laughter from the crowd, “I’ve prepared some notes.”

—John Trent ’85/’87, ’00M.A.