

Fred Kiesner, head of entrepreneurship program at Loyola Marymount University, to retire next month

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Plaques and other awards outside a small office boast the achievements of Fred Kiesner's kids.

Kiesner, a professor of entrepreneurship at Loyola Marymount University in Westchester, has one daughter, but also counts the roughly 16,000 students he has taught as his kids.

"I've always called them my kids," Kiesner said. "I've got at least three billionaires I've taught, tons and tons of millionaires and a hell of a lot of successful people who have done well in life. "

In a career that has spanned more than four decades, Fred Kiesner has helped instill the ideals of entrepreneurship in students in the United States, Russia, China and other parts of the world.

Next month, the man students call Grandpa Fred, who heads Loyola's Fred Kiesner Center for Entrepreneurship, will retire. The entrepreneurship program has repeatedly been named as among the best in the nation by various magazines, including Forbes.

"It was the most unbelievably fulfilling life you could imagine," the aging scholar said. "Just an incredible life. "

Poor health is forcing Kiesner, 75, to retistep down. He has suffered several heart attacks over the years, and carries a container of nitroglycerin in case his heart gives out again. A broken leg in December also took a toll. His wife Elaine would take him to class each day in a wheelchair until he healed.

He also complained about his worsening face blindness and name blindness, where he has trouble recognizing people out of a familiar context. To deal with his these blind spots in his memory, he gives some of his students memorable nicknames.

"I've got to bow out," Kiesner said. "I'm going to miss my kids something fierce. "

His faculty colleagues and current and former students recently threw a party in his honor that brought him to tears. Some of his personal awards and other mementos used in a display at the party now sit in cardboard boxes on the floor of his office. He will take them with him on his last day on May 8.

On the wall of his office hangs a plaque noting his induction into the Claremont Graduate University Alumni Hall of Fame, where he earned a doctorate in business.

"He's sort of a celebrity here," said Ramtin Sarbaz, a Loyola business student and founder of a business fraternity on campus. "Everybody talked highly of his classes and I knew I had to take his class. When I meet with him, it's an unforgettable experience. ... He's an extremely inspiring and an extremely caring person. He has real love for his students and really wants them to succeed. "

Kiesner gave Ramtin the nickname Rin Tin Tin.

The professor takes his students to competitions where they make presentations of the business plans they have created. He brings in successful entrepreneurs to speak to his classes, including a recent talk by Groupon co-founder Brad Keywell, one of Kiesner's former students.

Sam Walton, who founded Wal-Mart, also has spoken to Kiesner's classes.

The professor helps students better understand themselves through self-assessments that include naming personal heroes, describing life goals and explaining their reason for being on Earth.

"I teach real stuff, not book stuff," Kiesner said.

Mario Palladini, one of Kiesner's earliest students, described him as "uniquely interesting and as amazing a character as you'll ever find in the world of business. "

Today, Palladini owns Litho Pac Inc., a Torrance printed packaging company for the health food industry. He remembers his former teacher as supportive and tough.

"It was a practical application of business theory. That was the key. To this day I think about it," said Palladini, 57, of Rolling Hills Estates. "What he did for me was instill inspiration, he instilled motivation but he also helped instill confidence. As much as he inspired you, he also chewed on you and he knew how to properly balance his approach to each individual student. "

A gray beard frames a warm smile on Kiesner's face. He is a natural storyteller and jokes constantly, sprinkling his anecdotes with occasionally salty language. During an interview with a reporter, he noted his Irish roots and slipped into an Irish accent.

Referring to his 16,000 "kids," he quipped: "Pretty virile indeed. "

His wife, Elaine, a retired kindergarten teacher, has volunteered in his classes for the past eight years.

"The ability he has to motivate people, it's just astounding," Elaine Kiesner said. "And the love they have for him, it's just amazing. And some of that has spilled onto me. "

Fred Kiesner grew up in Minnesota. He was arrested at age 13 for stealing cars. But instead of going to jail, he was paroled into the custody of a local priest. Kiesner lived in a monastery for three years. He then attended the University of Minnesota, where he flunked out because he was too busy partying.

Kiesner eventually enlisted in the Army and started to straighten out his life.

He moved to Los Angeles in 1961 and ran an import-export business. He also started teaching business at local colleges.

His company was going well until a five-month dockworkers strike hit, devastating his business. That led to the first of several heart attacks.

"I was a millionaire at 32 and flat broke at 34," he recalled. "I tell my kids I don't care how you've failed. It's how you come back from it. "

Kiesner decided he didn't have a healthy enough heart to run a company, so he focused on teaching business and working as a consultant for the U.S. Small Business Administration.

He started teaching at Loyola in 1974 and traveled around the world giving lectures.

In 1987, he helped found a business school on an island on Russia's east coast. The school operated until 1996 with the help of donations, including from billionaire investor George Soros, who gave \$300,000.

To avoid 50 percent levies on funds wired into Russia, Kiesner smuggled the money into the country, he said.

"It was wild times. Really good times but also scary times," he said. "We watched the collapse of communism in Russia. We saw the changes coming in China. "

Today, with retirement just days away, Kiesner is vague about how he will fill his time. He has three grandchildren he plans see more often and he sees opportunities for volunteer work.

He smiled and glanced at his wife.

"I'm going to chase her," he said.