

# A catalyst for science

**BSU chemistry trailblazer Park Wiseman turns 100 this year**

**By Nick Werner, '03**

Park Wiseman arrived at Ball State Teachers College in 1947 expecting to spend a year there, maybe two.

After all, Wiseman was a chemist with a doctoral degree, and Ball State at the time held only a marginal interest in science. The institution focused almost entirely on preparing educators for the classroom. Wiseman, on the other hand, wanted to prepare students for careers in science.

“We had a ‘chemistry area’ then,” Wiseman recalled. “It wasn’t even called a department. All the sciences were banded around the biology department. The emphasis was on science education.”

Wiseman never left, though.

Instead of using Ball State to advance his career, Wiseman used his career to advance Ball State.

He retired in 1982 but remains an emeritus faculty member. He still lives in Muncie and on December 29 he turns 100 years old.

That he and Ball State will pass the century mark together in 2018 is a coincidence worth celebrating. But the occasion is especially noteworthy because of the key role Wiseman played in helping grow the teachers college into a full-fledged university with an abundance of degree programs.

Wiseman and others helped convince past University President John Emens, who served from 1945 to 1968, to establish independent academic departments for math, physics, chemistry, biology and geology, and to expand the institution’s mission beyond just science education.

He was the first head of the chemistry department when it was formed in 1965 and served for four years. Wiseman was also instrumental in setting up the chemistry major program and getting its accreditation by the American Chemical Society.

Wiseman’s lasting contributions are commemorated in a scholarship that bears his name, established by one of the many students touched by the chemist’s kindness.

“We are lucky that so many young people have benefited,” Wiseman said about the scholarship.

## **A hard-luck childhood**

The scholarship matters to Wiseman because he knows first-hand the value of financial aid.

He was born the youngest of four kids to Anna and Elmer Wiseman on a farm north of Defiance, Ohio. Elmer Wiseman, who taught school in addition to farming, died when Park was only 4 years old.

Wiseman spoke about his life during an hour-long interview this fall at Westminster Village, an assisted living community where he lives now.

“It was Christmastime,” Wiseman said. “The hogs got out. He went outside and try to run them down in zero degree weather.”

The 41-year-old father developed pneumonia in both lungs.

“That was the end,” Wiseman said.

Wiseman’s mother sold the farm and moved the family into Defiance. She supported her children during the Great Depression by cooking and sewing. Wiseman and his brother eventually helped, too. Each delivered newspapers, and Wiseman’s brother caddied for golfers at a country club.

“If you made money, it went into the pile,” Wiseman said.

Wiseman attended DePauw University on a full-tuition Rector Scholarship, “DePauw’s oldest and preeminent merit academic scholarship.” Wiseman knew his mother couldn’t afford to pay for room and board, so he borrowed money and paid off the loan by working as a waiter his senior year.

In his junior year, Wiseman met a sophomore music student named Marjorie Nelson on a blind date. They fell in love and married shortly after Marjorie graduated. Marjorie also made her career at Ball State, serving as Director of Circulation in University Libraries.

Marjorie Wiseman died in 2017 at 97 years old. The couple was married for 75 years.

“I never recall having a serious argument,” Wiseman said.

After DePauw, the Wisemans moved to West Lafayette so Park could attend Purdue University, where he earned an MS and PhD in organic chemistry.

Wiseman then took a job as a “bench chemist” with Firestone Tire and Rubber Company in Akron, Ohio. The job required him to work with hydrofluoric acid.

"I never quite relaxed," he said.

After a year in Akron, Wiseman moved to Muncie, happy to be interacting with students instead of dangerous chemical solutions.

### **Remembering a teacher**

Bob Reed, '58, remembers Wiseman's organic chemistry class.

In some large lecture settings, chemistry professors were known for writing equations in chalk with the right hand and erasing them seconds later with the left hand, Reed said. Students were forced to keep up. Some got left behind. But not Wiseman. He took time with his class.

"When he lectured, he related chemistry to life," Reed said. "Where you found these chemicals. What they were used for. It was a fascinating way to receive that kind of education."

Wiseman remembers Bob too.

"He was one of the best students I ever had," Wiseman said.

Reed called the class a turning point. He said it sparked a fascination with learning and set him on a path to become a cardiologist.

After Reed's graduation, the pupil and the professor lost touch for 50 years. Wiseman was unaware of the oversized influence he had on Reed's life. But the medical doctor never forgot.

"Everybody remembers a good teacher in their life," Reed's wife, Carlene said

In 2008, Bob and Carlene established the Park Wiseman Scholarship to honor the chemistry professor. Recipients must be at least a sophomore and majoring in chemistry. The award typically pays about \$1,000 but may change from year to year.

Wiseman has contributed to the fund also.

Already, 50 students have benefited from the scholarship.

Wiseman first set foot on campus more than 70 years ago, yet his footprint remains. His legacy endures, not only in laboratories and lecture halls, but also in the lives of so many current and future alumni.

Not bad for someone who didn't plan on staying.