

Raton's Leo Linsky, restless man for all seasons

By Tim Keller

Special to The Chronicle-News

RATON — Leo Linsky grew up in Point Lick, W. Va., an abandoned coal camp with 50 empty houses and 30 “men, women, children, dogs and cats.” At 22, he got out, loading everything he owned into an old Volkswagen Beetle — “I still had room to leave the passenger seat empty” — and drove west, in 1974, to New Mexico.

“I knew a preacher in West Virginia whose brother taught the Old Testament and Greek at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales,” Linsky recalls today.

“I wanted a new life. I wanted to learn Greek and Hebrew, and I wanted to prove to myself that I could make it on my own, 1,700 miles from home, with no phone and no financial aid.”

He worked two to three jobs at a time while becoming the first person from Point Lick to earn a college degree.

By 1997 he'd arrived in Raton to teach at Raton High School, the latest stop in a peripatetic journey that included marriage, family and an apparently limitless curiosity mixed with almost incessant activity.

He taught himself chess at 28, then won second place in the amateur division of the New Mexico State Championship Chess Tournament in 1986.

As a construction worker, Linsky became intrigued one day watching an electrician work. “I bought books and studied. Three months later, I earned my master electrician's license.”

He worked as a machinist, a youth minister, a brick worker, a roofer, a janitor, a librarian, a retail salesman, and a mechanic. The list goes on.

“One thing that I like about myself,” he says, “is that I can learn quickly. Anything that anyone else can do, I believe that I can do.”

Last year he bought a red 1991 Volvo that had sat unused for a decade.

“They couldn't get it to run. Their kids had converted it to a playhouse.” Linsky bought the car and then a repair manual. He determined that the heart of the engine was solid, but he repaired or replaced most of the other parts and all of the fluids. Now it's his primary vehicle and runs like a clock.

Four years ago, with his second wife, Margaret Robertson-Linsky, he bought a four-bedroom 1910 two-story house on a corner lot on South 5th Street just west of downtown Raton. It had a big basement for his woodshop, but the house was unlivable. “Nothing worked: no heat, no water, no electricity. It was horrible.”

Although one senses from Linsky's restless energy that the renovation will never be complete, he and his granddaughter, Sadie Martinez, and Margaret, can now sit on the front porch of a beautifully-restored home, or upstairs on the balcony, and enjoy a clear view of Johnson Mesa. (From the back porch, they have a clear view of the Raton sign on Goat Hill.)

“My house is my biggest project, and my pride and joy,” he says as he shows before and after photographs. He even took down the crumbling brick chimney and rebuilt it to match the original.

Inside, much of the fine furniture, including the long Shaker drop-leaf dining table, was designed and built in his base-



Tim Keller/Special to The Chronicle-News

Leo Linsky enjoys his most recent project, a porch swing in front of the historic house he's been renovating.



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Leo Linsky is currently working with his students to paint room numbers and signs throughout Raton High School.

ment woodshop. A small storage building across the back lawn has been turned into an immaculate guest cottage complete with

relationships,” he says. “Everything comes down to that.”

He's also the teacher for the school's gifted-and-talented students in the Extended Learning Program, where the curriculum has no limits.

“Last month they were curious about how an internal combustion engine works, so I brought in a lawn mower. We disassembled the engine down to the last nut and bolt. Then we put them back together.”

Before that, there was the road-kill project. Linsky had found a dead dog along a road near the school. “We took the skeleton apart, cleaned and bleached each piece, identified and labeled every part, then reassembled the skeleton. It became a sort of archaeology project when we discovered that some pieces were missing. We went back out there and sifted through the dirt until we had everything, down to the last toenail.”

His classroom is rarely empty of students, even at lunch or before school when students are eating or working or playing chess.

One of last year's ELP projects was learning how to roll a kayak. “When you go kayaking, you're going to roll upside down, it's inevitable. If you can't roll yourself back up, then you don't kayak, you swim.” It's a difficult maneuver. Every student mastered it.

That led to Linsky's courses at Raton Regional Aquatic Center: six sessions of 60-90 minutes, twice a week for three weeks, in which students learn to roll a kayak. Seven students of all ages began the current session; two have dropped out “and five will make it,” he says. The aquatic center is taking signups (at 575-445-4271) for the next session, which begins April 10.

When Linsky is not busy (yes, that's intended as a joke), he serves as scorekeeper for Raton Tiger home basketball games. In the summer he umpires baseball games. It turns out that he played in the Little League World Series in Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., when he was 18, batting .500 in the lead-off position and hitting a home run. He led his league that year in batting average, .484, and his stolen base record still stands in Kanawha County, W. Va. He went through that entire 1970 season without striking out.

On Jan. 1 each year, Linsky drives to Eagle Nest Lake for the annual Polar Bear Swim where a hole is cut in the 12-inch-thick ice, and then he and others jump in. The water is so cold that it burns his skin. He looks forward to doing it again.

You begin to suspect that this story will never end, that there's no limit to Linsky's restless activity. Yet it's hard to keep him still any longer to tell it, so end it must.

His sights are currently set on the spring and summer kayaking season when he's an avid white water kayaker, regularly running the class 3 rapids at Pilar, below Taos, and class 5 rapids upstream at Questa. With kayaks strapped to the top of the red Volvo, he returns to West Virginia each summer to run the rapids of the New and Gauley Rivers.

Running rapids, he's knocked over and rolled upside down all the time; there's no way around it. He always rolls back up.

Murphy bed and shower.

Crossing the lawn means meeting Lefty, Willie and Rio, Linsky's three young border collies.

“I really love my dogs. They're so active.” At six every morning, in every season, he drives them to the top of the Old Raton Pass, where he walks three miles while they romp freely. In the evenings he often takes them to run at Lake Dorothea, and no day is complete without a session chasing the Frisbee at Raton's soccer field.

“I can't even say the word ‘Frisbee’ around Lefty: she'll just go crazy. She stands next to me as I throw the Frisbee. I can get that thing to go 70 yards. As it floats to the ground, Lefty is there to catch it.”

Linsky is proud of the new porch swing out front, designed and assembled from 1"x4" pine contoured to fit the curves of a person's back and legs, joined by small pieces of pipe. He made 176 separate pieces before assembling and painting them.

“I feel like I have to make something, or create something.”

You begin to wonder whether he ever sleeps. He doesn't. “I don't sleep well. I've never slept through a night. I catnap, two or three hours at a time.”

By 4 a.m. he's up. “I love to study, and I love that early morning quiet time with no one to answer to or entertain. I can just read.”

Until the dogs take him away at 6, he reads history and philosophy. He's currently studying World War II and just finished reading William Shirer's 1,264-page “The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich.” He also makes a point to read two college textbooks each year.

Not surprisingly, he's a popular and unconventional teacher at Raton High School, where his courses include world history, U.S. history, philosophy, and sociology.

“Bottom line, all of my courses come down to one thing: human

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- believe that you deserve to be hurt or mistreated?
- wonder if you're the one who is crazy?

Does Your Partner:

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- treat you so badly that you're embarrassed for your friends or family to see?
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