

# Talkative prof prefers OCC to Harvard Square

By Mike Scanlon  
staff writer

Wear comfortable shoes if you're going to spend time talking with James Vendetouli, because you're going to cover a lot of ground.

Vendetouli, a professor at Oakland Community College, really loves to talk, and it becomes clear very early.

For example: How old is he?

"People thought I was in the 13th century when they called my name, and often I was," he said. "My mentality varies from the B.C.s to the future millenia on earth, which I think there will be. But in any event, in terms of my birth, I've reached the mid-century."

THE BEST thing to do at that point, obviously, is settle-back comfortably in a good chair, grab a hot cup of coffee, light up a smoke and settle in for a good listen.

Vendetouli teaches World Religions and Bible — not The Bible. Just Bible. B-I-B-L-E. No greater book can be written — but his interests are many.

"Part of my reason for coming here was to take my philosophy out of the ivory tower, which is where I think it was when I was at Harvard and Brown," said Vendetouli, who has B.A. degrees from both places and an M.A. and Ph.D. from Harvard in two different subjects.

He used to teach at Harvard and at Groton, an exclusive high school where he also coached baseball.

On the academic globe, those points are far from Oakland Community College as Tumbuktu is from Kalamazoo on a more conventional map. But the language Vendetouli speaks translates well enough onto Orchard Ridge to make him one of those professors remembered by students all their lives.

VENDETOUTOLI was born, raised and educated in Providence, R.I. "I never thought I would cross the Hudson River, never thought I would have to cross the Hudson River. But I'm not discontent that I made my way here," he said.

He ended up at OCC's Orchard Ridge Campus in Farmington Hills, he said, mainly because he was a student at Oxford during the 1967 riot. He found he couldn't answer fellow students' questions about what was happening in Detroit.

"As a Red Sox fan, I said, 'Why are they winning the pennant?'" Vendetouli said. "As an American, I felt embarrassed not to know about what I now think is real American life."

SO HE WAS GLAD when "I got a call to make possible two things. First was to save a college in Detroit. Secondly to help that college change from white to black. It was then called Michigan Lutheran College. It's now called Shaw College. A lot of people, good people, are graduates from Shaw College who might otherwise never have gone to college at all."

Having heard good things about OCC while doing research on community and junior colleges for the U.S. Dept. of Education, he said, he ended up there by applying for an administrator's job.

He now figures the college, having long since decided who it really wanted for the job, accepted his application in a sham demonstration of competitive job posting. But he doesn't mind.

He likes working at a community college "frankly, for an opportunity to be as close to the grass roots of higher education as possible."

IN THE OLD DAYS he taught "people whom I



BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

James Vendetouli: "Part of my reason for coming here was to take my philosophy out of the ivory tower, which is where I think it was when I was at Harvard and Brown."

know — because of their family, their connections and their ability — would be moving into the highest circles of society.

"But we can't have a society just for leaders. We have to have educated people who are going to be led. Especially if they're going to elect the leaders. I believe in the intelligence of everyone I meet."

Otherwise "we won't have the country I believe in and the kind of society I'd be willing to work for."

He's disappointed that OCC's offerings and the college itself are not held in higher esteem.

"People here don't realize what they've got in said in the community, do people think of OCC as anything but the 'only chance school,' serving students who can't be admitted elsewhere."

"From counselors in the high schools and attitudes in the community, nobody ever thought this was a real college. It was more like an extension of high school."

Vendetouli thinks otherwise.

"A student can't possibly get in their first two years as good an education as they can here. They can get a famous professor (elsewhere), but usually they get a graduate student," he said.

Summer-term OCC students who attend other colleges at other times tend to agree, said Vendetouli as he walked down a hallway past a biology class.

"Some of them tell me not only do they not see the professor in biology, they don't see the lab. They watch it on television," he said. "Why do parents allow that to happen to their children?"

"Universities should focus their resources financially on the two years when (students) need the professors, in the two years they're going to get their major."

"WHAT I'M SAYING could be ridiculed because universities aren't going to close their doors to first-year students. But they might cut back a little."

"I'd like people to realize they have their own quality college in their own community."

Still, Vendetouli admits he didn't attend a community college, and "my parents perhaps would have been unhappy if I did."

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