Retiring professor built school’s maritime program

Stephen Curley’s career and life have revolved around the oceans

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GALVESTON — When Stephen Curley first arrived at Texas A&M at Galveston, the Pelican Island campus consisted of two buildings — one that housed all the administrative offices and classrooms, the other a windowless engineering machine shop.

Curley, the school’s regents professor of English, was 26 years old. That was 46 years ago. The campus housed the Moody College of Marine Sciences and Maritime Resources then, home to 109 students training in marine transportation and marine engineering. Now, Texas A&M University at Galveston enrolls about 2,600 students a year in a wide range of undergraduate and graduate studies, is a well-regarded research center, and is one of the select places in the country to study all things searelated.

“I came the first year they’d expanded outside of marine training,” Curley said. “I’ve had a great career.” Curley, who had earned a doctoral degree from Rice University, came to Galveston to teach English composition, technical writing and introduction to literature. At the time, there was one teacher per academic discipline and there were no fulltime professors for history or political science.

Fortysix years later, after creating the school’s Maritime Studies degree program, the only bachelor of arts degree available on campus; receiving a National Endowment for the Humanities grant; writing or editing five books, including Aggies by the Sea, the official history of the school, published in 2005; and garnering practically every known teaching award at the campus and university system level, Curley is on the verge of retiring. On April 17, the university will honor him with a retirement reception at the campus waterfront pavilion; he’ll teach through the end of the semester in May.

Curley’s delight in teaching and in the subject matter he teaches are on full display in his office. A handmade diorama of a pirates’ ship, populated by Lego pirates, occupies one shelf on a wall of bookcases. A sign beneath states: “Work like a captain. Play like a pirate.”

Curley earned his sea legs and honed the craft of teaching over the summers he taught aboard the Texas Clipper, Texas A&M University’s maritime training ship, he said.

“I loved that ship,” he said. “It was the longest serving ship in the American Merchant Marine and was retired out of Brownsville, sunk to make a reef.”

Curley’s teaching adventures aboard ship took him to the Caribbean, the Mediterranean, across Europe and through the Panama Canal to Lima, Peru — 10 weeks at sea before email, when a postcard might be delivered a
month later and telephone calls were prohibitively expensive.
“For somebody who couldn’t afford to travel like that, it was a great adventure,” he said.
Progress at the Texas A&M University at Galveston campus has been a point of pride and pleasure for Curley, he said.
“When I came, the school was, in a sense, in its infancy,” he said. “By the late ’80s it was ranked nationally and known internationally. The students and faculty are stellar.”
Curley will retire to working on his watercolors, continuing to pluck away on the guitar and spending more time with his grandchildren.
“It’s time. I’m a graduating senior. This is my commencement.”