PIONEER MEMORIAL AWARD 2020

Ruth Fjelstad

Ruth Fjelstad of Decorah, Iowa, arrived at Luther College in 1954, when she was hired as an assistant professor by Luther’s academic dean, O.W. Qualley ’18. She spent the next 35 years building the college’s Spanish language and literature courses into a stellar program, benefiting not only Luther College but the hundreds of students who majored or minored in Spanish during that time.

A native of Minnesota, Ruth grew up in Owatonna and attended St. Olaf College in Northfield. After graduation, she continued her studies at the University of Iowa, receiving a master’s degree in 1949. Ruth returned to St. Olaf to teach Spanish from 1949 to 1951, and she taught at Hanover College in Indiana from 1952 to 1953, before joining the faculty at Luther. Before long, Ruth began working on her PhD at the University of Iowa, where she also served as graduate assistant and research assistant in Spanish. During the 1960-61 academic year, she was the recipient of a Danforth Teachers Grant from the University of Iowa. Ruth was granted tenure at Luther in 1961, and she completed her doctoral degree at Iowa in 1963. Ten years later, in 1973, she was promoted to full professor at Luther, where she continued to teach until her retirement in 1989, as professor emerita of Spanish.

In addition to her teaching duties, Ruth was an active member of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, and she served as group leader for the Spanish Interim to Cuernavaca, Mexico, in 1966-67 and 1972.

In retirement Ruth organized trips to Spain in 1993 and 1996 and has enjoyed traveling to other parts of the world; volunteered with the Northeast Iowa Retired and Senior Volunteer Program and Vesterheim Museum; served on the Friends of Decorah Public Library Board; and has been an active member of Decorah’s West Side Club and its Travel Club.

A regular, generous contributor to the college since 1955 and a life member of President’s Council since 1997, Ruth provided the initial funding for the Luther College Global Partners Scholarship, which was designed to foster increased meaningful learning experiences for students from around the world. Through provisions in her estate plan, Ruth has arranged for additional funding for this scholarship, along with funding for the Ruth Fjelstad Scholarship, to support students with financial need, and the Ruth Fjelstad Access and Opportunity Scholarship.

The Pioneer Memorial Award was established in 1988 to honor individuals who characterize the spirit of Heritage Club, and whose generous support serves as an inspiration to others. It is with sincere thanks for her visionary commitment and steadfast support to Luther that we present the 2020 Pioneer Memorial Award to Ruth Fjelstad.

Luther College
Decorah, Iowa