



A center like no other

By Todd Haight



No one will likely mistake the Oakland Center for one of the seven wonders of the world. But in 1959, Oakland University's new one-half million dollar multipurpose building was definitely something out of the ordinary.

"Woody Varner named it the 'Oakland Center' because he wanted everyone to use it," says Bill Marshall of OU's first chancellor who recruited Marshall to become the center's fifth director from 1973-1995. "Student unions are for students. Woody told me, 'This is the only gathering place on campus so we want faculty and staff and the community to use it. We want to build a sense of community.'"

Built in three stages, the main building opened in 1959. Two years later, OU added the north wing and a south addition in 1971.

Designed by Swanson Associates and built by J.A. Fredman, right from the start the streamlined 34,776-square-foot facility on the west end of campus was a hit. Generations of students have embraced the Oakland Center as the "family room of the university." Even faculty and staff quickly found valuable uses for meeting and social gatherings.

"It was a carnival environment," Marshall says. "There were times for serious discussion, but there were times for dancing and singing

and people talking. Before the library opened, sometimes you couldn't find a seat."

Almost 40 years later, the Oakland Center is poised for another major remodeling project scheduled to begin in June 1998. OU expects to complete the \$1.9-million lower-level renovation by January 1999. The

goal is to upgrade existing facilities and to increase interaction among student groups by bringing them closer together.

This follows the launching of the new \$1.3-million food court in early 1997.

If you remember the center in its original structure and design, you might find it hard to recognize now. Today, the size of Oakland Center has tripled, reaching 115,000 square feet.

Far from the orange and gold motif of the '70s, OU has transformed the Oakland Center into a colorful, aesthetically delightful campus hub.

The most striking change is evident the moment you enter. The Crockery multipurpose space is gone, and in its place is the food area — named Pioneer Court — that has quickly met with student approval.

"The OC is much more convenient now, a real benefit for students," junior Catina McCoy says as she picks up a late dinner. "It's providing more services, and the food court offers options to students. It's a real campus

As the second major remodeling of the Oakland Center approaches, you won't believe what you see

attraction now. Students come here for meals, to study and to find out what's happening with the student organizations."

With seating for around 500, the food court is both spacious and comfortable. A morning visit finds students cramming for class or chatting over coffee and bagels from the new Starbucks Coffee and Freshens Yogurt.

By noon, Oakland Center is buzzing with campus life. The center overflows with students, faculty and staff dining on food choices that range from tacos to taboullie. Standard food court fare includes favorites Taco Bell, Pizza Hut and Burger King, along with several tasty newcomers:

- DC Subs, offering deli and submarine-style sandwiches;
- Meadow Brook Farms, featuring roasted chicken and turkey with all the trimmings; and; and
- Center Stage, perhaps the most innovative aspect of the court.

"We call Center Stage presentation-style cooking," says Richard Fekel, director, Oakland Center. "We have chefs cooking hot entrees to order. The menu changes daily with choices like oriental stir fry, pita wraps, fajitas and Chicago-style hot dogs. People love it."

The court, which replaces the former JW's, also offers plenty of healthy choices, including fresh fruit, salads and nutritious entrees.

Campus visitors like Dan Cetnar of Tranex Financial also notice a big difference. Cetnar has been leading seminars at OU for two years, but also remembers frequent visits to friends at Hill House a dozen years ago.

"It looks great," he says. "An incredible difference from the '80s. It's nice and clean with lots of open areas. I hear piano playing every

now and then, and that adds a nice touch."

Alumni agree.

"The school is growing, so these improvements fit right in. It's a sign of the times," says Brad Driscoll CAS '66, chairman, Retail Resources Inc.

Barbara Williams CAS '66, MAT '80, is convinced the improvements enhance the university's sense of community.

"These changes encourage students to mingle because it's such a pleasant environment," says Williams, special education teacher, Lake Orion Community Schools. "As people form ties and develop a feeling of affiliation, they'll be more active alumni."

Leo Bowman CAS '76 calls the center a magnet that extends beyond the campus. "The university is making a bold, new statement that we will forge ahead to become a premiere university. As an alumnus, it makes me proud," says Bowman, judge, 50th District Court. "The university could have stayed still and said everything's just fine. But these improvements, coupled with everything else going on campus, will attract more high-caliber students and it will attract more alumni as well. And when the sports complex is completed, we're going to see a new level of student and alumni involvement."

Not everything is rosy inside the new Oakland Center these days. Finding a table around the lunch hour on weekdays, for example, is a tough chore. Long lines form for the most popular fares.

And junior Brian Potter, the newly elected president of the Oakland Center Advisory Council, says the food court is good business for the OC's first floor, but bad news for the lower level — for a while longer at any rate.

OAKLAND CENTER HISTORICAL TIMELINE

September 1959
Oakland Center's main building opens

August 1961
North wing added

January 1971
South addition completed

January 1997
Pioneer Court opens

September 1997
Fireside Lounge is refurbished with new furniture and an electronic sign is installed in Pioneer Court

Spring 1998
Copy Center and Information Center to open

January 1999
Lower-level renovation to be finished

"Very few students come to the lower level now," he says. "Bringing new services — the computer lab, games room, student organization rooms — will breathe new life into the lower level. There's an ocean of knowledge here, and it's part of the whole college experience."

Still, in spite of increasing traffic, Sandy Auten, office assistant, School of Education and Human Services, likes what she sees.

"The OC creates a nice central point for students," she says. "The court area pulls everyone together, and makes us more of a community." Fekel agrees.

"The food court is an enormous success," he says, adding it may have increased building traffic as much as 50 percent. "It's a great blend of food choices, and the court design allows us to handle a far greater volume than ever before."

The food court is just part of the transformation. Oakland Center is fast becoming not only a major source of campus meals, but information and instruction as well.

"We're placing a greater emphasis on leadership training and student activities," Fekel says. "We offer a variety of educational and cultural programs, as well as retreats and seminars that help develop OU students into leaders."

OC renovations are indicative of the university's dramatic growth. OU has already launched more than \$100 million in construction projects, including the recently opened \$43-million Science and Engineering Building, the under-construction \$37-million Recreation and Athletic Center and a planned \$17.5-million School of Business Administration building.

Robert Jarski, associate professor, Exercise Science, says the OC renovations are the ties that bond the university, blending faculty, staff and student interests.

"The center can contribute to making OU more of a living-learning environment, where faculty and students meet to study academic issues and detail," he says. "It strengthens relationships and learning opportunities. The OC is a gathering place for us as a community, and as a university family. It's the soul of the campus."

Woody Varner would have been proud.

Todd Haight CAS '87 is a freelance writer in Auburn Hills, Michigan.

Check out what else is cooking at the new Oakland Center

A new one-stop campus information shop will be located on the first floor next to the Fireside Lounge.

Student employees will provide information about OU departments, events, activities and the surrounding community.

The center will be open from 8 a.m. until late in the evening and on weekends.

In another change, the Oakland Center Scheduling Office, which is located next to the new information center, was renamed the Oakland Center Reservations Office to eliminate confusion. Before the change, students during registration assumed the office handled scheduling of classes.

Rick Perhai, plant engineer and energy manager, calls such learning improvements as the information center smart.

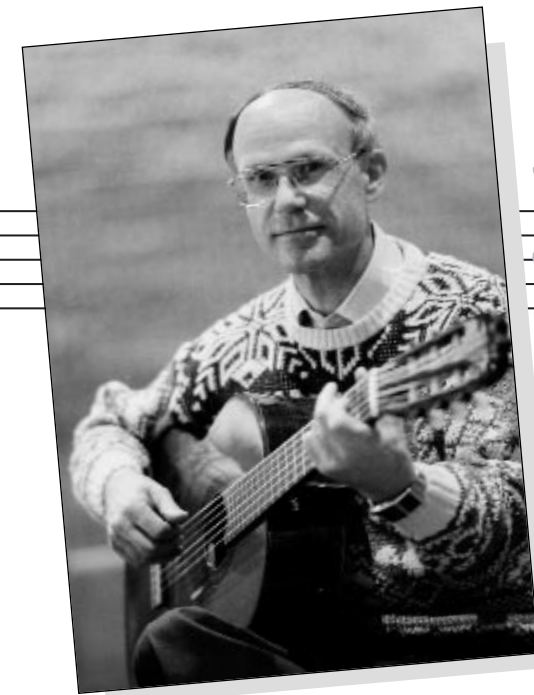
"That's a great idea," he says. "The information area is well-traveled and will make it more convenient to learn what's happening on campus, and the computer areas will improve student access," he says. "Oakland Center is being used like never before."

Here's what else is cooking:

- New thermal-pane windows
- Upgraded fire alarm system
- Possible Bookcenter expansion
- Full-service copy center which will offer duplicating, mailing and packaging services to students, faculty and staff
- Multipurpose room
- University history wall
- Area for displaying university-owned art



M a e s t r o @ Musica



Joe Blattert SEHS '71 put his life in harmony through the international language of music

By Ellen Creager

When Joe Blattert SEHS '71 arrived in Guadalajara, Mexico, he didn't speak much Spanish. But he did speak another language the residents vividly comprehended — seven-part harmony.

Since 1989, Blattert has helped church choirs there learn to sing complex parts and record and produce jazz-flavored compact disks of contemporary Mexican evangelical music. Along the way, the pianist, guitarist and instrumental arranger has absorbed a new culture and placed his musical imprint firmly on the city's musicians.

"If you ask musicians and worship leaders in Guadalajara, you find Joe has had his hand in the instruction of almost everybody," says the Rev. Michael LeBlanc, a Louisiana native who lives near Guadalajara, five hours northwest of Mexico City. "He even taught me how

to play the clarinet, much to the chagrin of the poor people who live with me."

Guadalajara is 12 hours south of Texas, a half-day's drive from the Pacific Ocean. Known as the "garden city," it has sunny weather year-round. "I haven't seen snow in seven years, except on vacation at Lake Tahoe," says Blattert, 50, a Marine City, Michigan, native who now lives in an apartment in the bustling metropolis of five million. Although Guadalajara is sprawling, Blattert believes living there has mellowed him and lowered his blood pressure.

"I'm naturally task-oriented, which is good for getting things done, and getting right to the point," he says. "Mexican people are very friendly and take less notice of what time it is. The whole culture there is people-oriented." Still, those who know him say Blattert remains a tough taskmaster and perfectionist who single-handedly has

elevated Guadalajara church choirs to new levels.

"He is very demanding and perhaps even intimidating as he has such high standards," says LeBlanc, pastor, Faith, Hope and Love Center of Tlaquepaque, near Guadalajara. "It's like it says in Ecclesiastes 1:18, with much wisdom there is much grief. Poor Joe suffers greatly when we hit a flat or wrong note or are slouchy in some way. But even though we fall far short, we have all improved greatly. Others also watch him in delight.

"I learned from him how to do computer-based sequencing arrangements, how to make harmony parts for a song and I helped him when he was recording," says Efrain Panecat, 22, Mexican pianist at the Praise Studio at Casa de Oracion, a 2,000-member church in Guadalajara where Blattert worked until 1997. "He always wants to do the best; even in the final production he is not satisfied. He was critical — and people thought he was tough — but we also learned we could always make things better."

Blattert's path from Oakland University to Guadalajara has been roundabout.

At age 19, Blattert took a trip to Mexico, his first outside the United States other than Canada. He made a big impression on the young people. "That trip made me be drawn to everything Hispanic and to the country," he says.

Back in the U.S., Blattert intended to become a priest at Sacred

Heart Seminary in Detroit. But he soon changed plans and enrolled in OU's Department of Music, Theatre and Dance. "There was no concert band when I started," he remembers. The young musician would eventually play 13 instruments, focusing on piano, guitar and bass guitar. After graduating, he taught guitar and piano while working as a musician at two Catholic parishes and the Zion Evangelistic Temple in Clawson and Troy.

In the early 1980s, Blattert had a fateful meeting with the Rev. Marco Polo Nunez, a pastor from Mexico who was visiting Michigan. The two worked together on a chorus tape at Zion Evangelistic Temple. They came up with the idea to use the orchestral track, translate the lyrics into Spanish, and proceeded to produce the tape in two languages. Although he didn't know it at the time, it

was a turning point. He briefly joined Youth With A Mission, a missionary program in Texas and Colorado. But in 1988, Blattert went to Guadalajara for six weeks at the invitation of Nunez and loved it.

A year later, he moved there for good. "It felt so far away from home at first, I might as well have been on Mars," he says. "Everything was so different."

His Spanish quickly improved, and the first church he worked at was Casa de Cristo, a small charismatic parish run by Nunez. He gave private music lessons and taught English at a local junior high. He also became involved with Casa de Oracion, the largest nondenominational Christian church in Guadalajara, whose dynamic pastor, Chuy Olivares, wanted to produce contemporary recordings with his large choir. In 1993, Blattert arranged and directed the music for the first Casa de Oracion compact disk, *Mi Refugio*.

The musical accompaniment was sequenced using synthesized orchestral sounds, along with live electric guitar and saxophone, with added tracks for the choir, lead singers and audience. The CD was widely distributed in Mexico and South America and picked up by a U.S. distributor, Canzion.

Since then, Blattert has completed five other recordings with Casa de Oracion: *Bajo Su Sombra*, *Rio de Adoracion II*, *Rio de Adoracion Instrumental*, *Albanzas Hacia Lo Alto* and *Sana Mi Tierra*.

It was at Casa de Oracion where LeBlanc remembers first hearing a Blattert choral arrangement. "The choir had about 50 voices, but they sounded

like angels or something. The song service was phenomenal," he remembers. That's when he asked Blattert to come teach his little 18-member choir to sing the same way.

Blattert has put a lot of miles on his truck. He drives back to Michigan most summers to earn extra money and visit his family. In 1997, he spent nearly six months in Detroit working as an executive assistant at the Karmanos Cancer Institute in order to buy a new truck and musical equipment. He also substituted as a musician at Shrine of the Little Flower, Royal Oak, and Divine Savior, Westland. He stayed long enough, too, for a memorial service for his father, who died last summer. But just after Christmas, he prepared to load up his truck with his keyboard, computer and possessions, drive to Florida to visit his mother, then trek the 2,400 miles back to Guadalajara.

"You should see me trying to get back across the border with all my musical equipment; it's always an adventure," he says.

The recording work has ended for now at Casa de Oracion, so Blattert is scheduled to work with three other

Mexican evangelical churches on their music programs, including LeBlanc's Faith, Hope and Love Center. The evangelical movement is something he is comfortable with theologically.

"I'm more nondenominational now," he says.

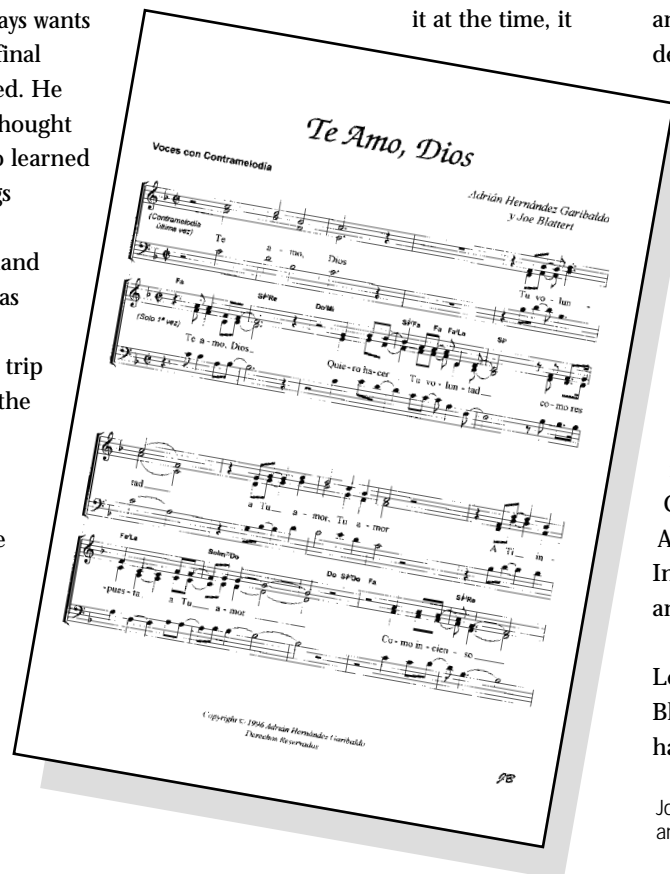
Although still tied to his Catholic heritage, he has embraced a more ecumenical view of Christianity over the years and laments the vast divide between the tradition-bound Mexican Catholic church and the evangelical Christian churches there. "I feel more of a calling to bring people together. There is no reason they cannot work together on some of the moral areas," Blattert says. "But unlike the ecumenical

movement in the U.S., the churches in Mexico are very far apart."

His religious music for the churches has veered toward seven-part harmony arrangements with a jazz feel, which is as popular in Mexico as it is among American evangelical congregations. He still teaches guitar, piano — and even clarinet — to those students who really want to learn. And although far away from Michigan, Blattert feels closer than he ever has to his friends and family. The combination of CNN from California and e-mail means "I can communicate with everyone," he says. "This last year, I've felt the U.S. is just around the corner."

And although he speaks Spanish fluently now, the international language of music puts true harmony in his life.

Ellen Creager is a freelance writer in Grosse Pointe Woods, Michigan.



Joe Blattert SEHS '71 writes his own music, left, and practices on the piano, right.

