



Shasta College accounting professor Larry Lease (center), his wife Betty and daughter Amanda have proof that students value their teachers. They're driving around in a red Porsche convertible, thanks to a software developer who knows how to show his appreciation for a job well done.

Millionaire rewards teacher who helped him strike it rich

These days, when accounting professor Larry Lease takes to cruising the highways and byways of Shasta County in his arena red Porsche Boxter, he notices a lot of other drivers giving him the “thumbs up” sign.

That's because Lease has become something of a modern folk legend in these parts since a former student in his Shasta College “Principles of Accounting” class presented him with the convertible.

“It's a great feeling. People are really excited up here,” Lease says. “It really shows how teachers do have an influence on their students.”

In the couple of months since Lease's student, Robert Sullivan, gave him a car, the story has been carried around the world via news wire stories and even picked up by *People Magazine*. Lease and Sulli-

van have appeared on several radio and television programs, including CBS's *Early Show* with Bryant Gumbel and, most recently, *Oprah*.

Oprah Winfrey, who appeared on CTA's television show, *Quest*, is especially fond of these stories, Lease discovered.

“She loves teachers. She's just a pro-teacher kind of person. In fact, she was worried that she was going to start crying during the story,” Lease recalls.

Although Lease doesn't seem too surprised by the attention the story has received, he still can't quite believe it. After all, the whole thing started out as a joke.

Lease remembers his former student, Robert Sullivan, from the fall of 1986 as “a very bright student, very personable. He had a positive attitude and a real twinkle in his eye.” Lease was so im-

pressed with Sullivan, he persuaded him to tutor other students.

Lease enjoyed the entire class and told his students so on the last day of the semester. As a lark, he also added, “If anyone becomes wealthy some day, you can always show your appreciation by buying me a Porsche.”

The teacher's parting words became a long-running joke among his students, many of whom would run into him over the next few years and ask him about it. But Lease lost touch with Sullivan, who had had his own ups and downs over the years. In fact, over the next decade, Sullivan went from a low point where he was living in his car to the high point of owning his own company. In 1996, Lease and Sullivan ran into each other and started keeping in touch.

Still, Lease couldn't have been more surprised to see Sullivan on campus in February. He had come, ostensibly, to show his wife around his old haunts. When Lease accompanied Sullivan to the park-

ing lot, he couldn't help but notice a brand new Porsche parked in front.

“I didn't know what to think. It just took my breath away. And then, Robert said, ‘This is yours.’ I was absolutely speechless,” Lease says. “It is the most beautiful car I've ever seen.”

If Lease was speechless, some of his closest family members were incredulous. His mother told him she didn't believe him and would believe it “when I see you on ‘Oprah.’” Fortunately, she had become a believer by the time of his appearance on the show in March.

Lease recognizes that accounting can be a dry subject and is faced with the challenge of making it relevant for his students. But he also tells them they are likely to use the information and he guides them in trying to find work.

In the case of Robert Sullivan, his guidance clearly paid off. Sullivan is now a multimillionaire software developer who has not only paid his dues, but learned to thank the people who helped him on the way.

“I've gotten so much more out of this than I ever expected. It was a milestone for me to be able to do something like this,” says Sullivan.

“I just really wanted to show my appreciation to Larry. He has such a passion for teaching. He believes that what he's doing makes a difference — and that's what makes an impact on his students.”

DALE MARTIN