

THE EDUCATION OF DR. ALAN GRIBBEN

A professor learns — the hard way — the cost of expressing politically unpopular views at UT-Austin

By Bill Marvel

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AUSTIN — For the next few weeks, Dr. Alan Gribben will be packing up the books in his office. A "For Sale" sign stands in front of his northwest Austin home. Real estate agents occasionally bring prospects by, though the market is not robust.

One couple was interested in the home until they heard who owned it.

"This is Alan Gribben's home?" the wife exclaimed. "The Alan Gribben?"

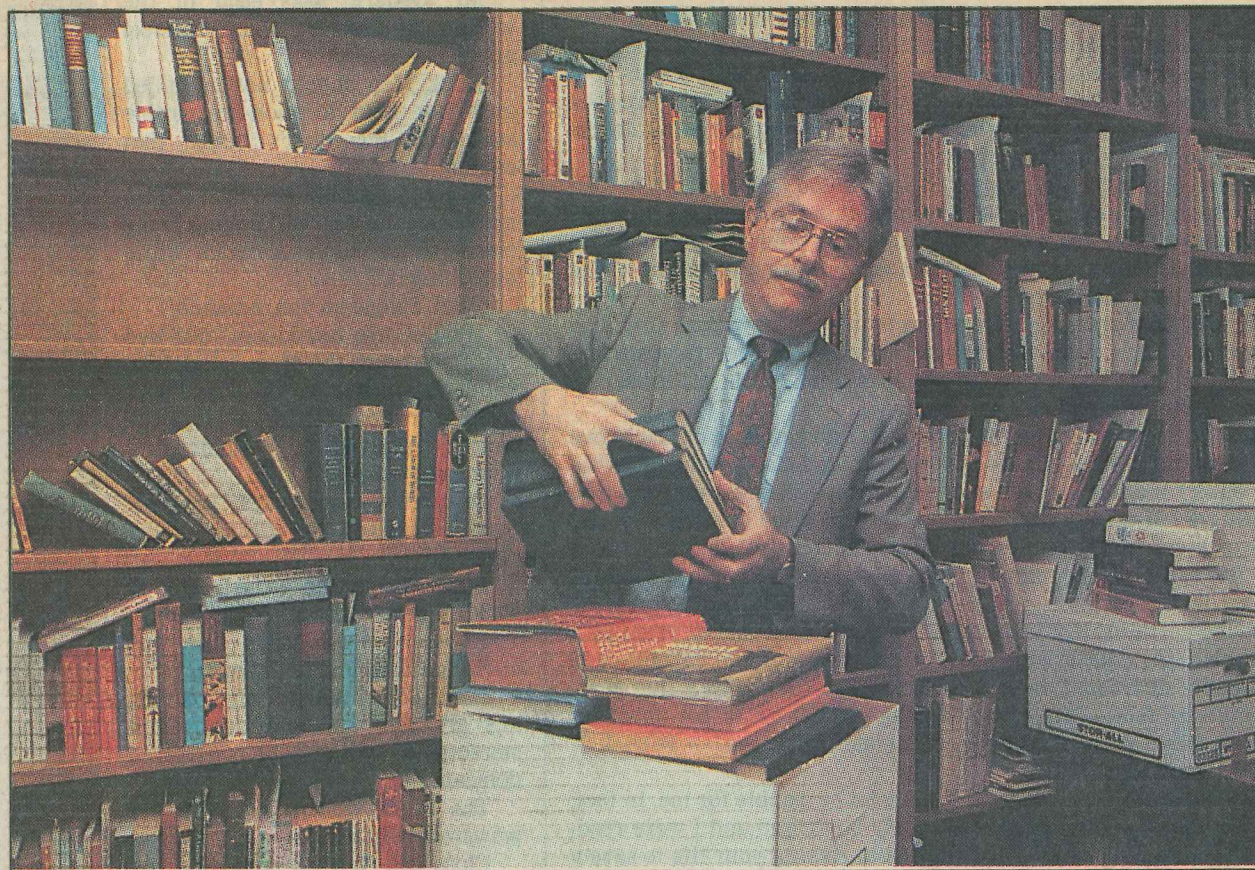
Yes, the very one. The Alan Gribben whose name — in newspaper columns and editorials, in magazine articles, on television talk shows — has become a focus for the national debate on PC — "political correctness."

For years, Dr. Gribben enjoyed a tenured position on the faculty of a major university, the leisure to research and write in his chosen field, prestige and the esteem of colleagues. It was a dream job.

The dream is over now, he says. After 17 years as one of the brighter lights on the English faculty of the University of Texas, the Mark Twain scholar says he has become an unpopular man on campus. Colleagues shun him. Graduate students no longer seek his guidance. Committee assignments have dried up.

It all started four years ago, he says, when he cast a lone dissenting voice against a graduate-level program in Third World and minority literature. (In fact, he points out, he voted for the program at the doctoral level but against it at the master's

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Special to The Dallas Morning News: Associated Press

Dr. Alan Gribben, who feels he has been under siege, packs books in his office at UT-Austin.



Dr. Gribben and his wife, Irene, are trying to sell their house.

"Some people called me and said, 'We're your friends and we think you should know that you're being talked about as a racist.' I laughed. You see, I didn't understand what I'd hooked into."

— Dr. Alan Gribben, former University of Texas English professor

Gribben tried at first to placate his critics at the university

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level, because, he says, he felt that students needed better preparation in traditional European, English and American literature before undertaking such a specialty.)

The day after the vote, he says, "some people called me and said, 'We're your friends, and we think you should know that you're being talked about as a racist.'"

"I laughed. You see, I didn't understand what I'd hooked into."

The head of the English department, Dr. Joseph Kruppa, no longer will comment on the issue, but in the past he has said that Dr. Gribben has simply found himself on the losing side of an argument over just how English is going to be taught at the University of Texas.

Alan Gribben — graying at 49, genial, mild-mannered — seems an unlikely symbol of conservatism and racism. In the early 1970s, he was a student radical on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley, fighting the good fight for civil rights and against U.S. involvement in Vietnam. His credentials are in order: He was arrested and hauled off to jail during demonstrations for a "Third World college."

"I bet I have quite an FBI file," he says.

He says he still believes in the causes of justice and equality, but he turned away from what he saw as the radicals' growing violence and intolerance. Now, he says, he finds himself the victim of what he considers the same kind of political intolerance.

"Maybe I seem a little naive," he says, "but when I cast that vote, I thought we were discussing a pedagogical issue."

His first instinct was to try to patch things up, smooth things over with his critics.

"I blush to say some of the things I did that first year of my ostracism. I changed eyeglasses, hairstyle, mustache, wardrobe. I got all pastel shirts. I thought, see, that maybe I was looking too severe, too moralistic or something."

"I tried different techniques in the hallway to ingratiate myself. I would greet them heartily. I tried one thing, then another. I felt like I had been caught in a maze. I looked around, and they weren't doing it to anybody else."

would prefer to fight. He joined the National Association of Scholars, a Princeton-based organization that has become home to a number of academics who oppose what they see as an effort to stifle open discussion on American college campuses.

The NAS frequently is accused of conservatism and racism even though, defenders point out, it numbers prominent Marxist historian Eugene Genovese among its ranks.

In early 1989, Dr. Gribben wrote the first of several articles published in the association's journal, *Academic Questions*.

"I felt I had nothing left to lose. Trips to the mail room had become like floating among icebergs."

"The reaction was instantaneous. By the next week, half the department would have nothing to do with me and hasn't since. After that, it was clear that younger members of the department viewed me as a great liability. They're the future of the department. If I couldn't meet them on a cordial and equal footing, then that was the end."

Although Dr. Gribben's lower-division classes remained popular — mainly, he says, because students were curious about this controversial professor — few students signed up for his upper-division classes, and they were canceled. He's had no new committee assignments since 1989 and eventually found himself with only one doctoral student to supervise. Feeling that he had lost his effectiveness as a teacher and scholar, he made plans to leave the university.

His wife was appalled.

A third-generation Chinese-American, Irene Gribben says she has lived almost half her life in Austin and has come to love the city. Moreover, the couple's two children, 8 and 5, were adjusting happily to school. She refused to move at first.

"Alan didn't know what was happening to him, and I certainly didn't," she says. "These people have always been kind to me. How could they be kind to me and cruel to him?"

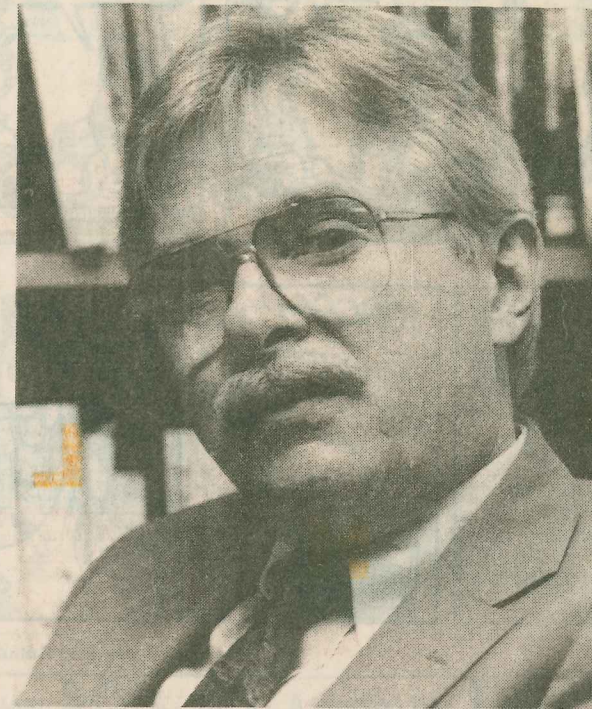
One day, she found a letter he had written to himself, justifying his position. "I read it. I was in tears. I finally understood how he felt."

She remains bitter, however, and puzzled by charges that her husband is a racist.

"I am a person of color. But it's

"I've had a lot of people say to me, 'You're leaving too soon. This has got to turn around.' But I live 80 percent of my time in that department. I walk those halls. People either recommend my courses, or they don't. They put me on Ph.D. committees, or they don't. And I am dead to my department."

— Dr. Alan Gribben



true worth at the university. It doesn't matter that he lives multiculturalism."

The final blow to any hopes the couple might have had to remain at UT or in Austin came last July, Dr. Gribben says, when a rally was held on the UT campus to protest cancellation of the controversial E 306 curriculum.

Proposed and approved by a majority of the English faculty members, the new curriculum would have replaced the traditional entry-level freshman composition course with a syllabus of readings drawn from Supreme Court decisions and other sources, dealing with such current issues as racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

"I decided I was going to oppose this," Dr. Gribben says, "and I decided I was going to make my opposition public. This course was simply too radical for anyone to countenance."

In letters to editors all over the state, in guest columns, in letters to UT alumni, Dr. Gribben urged opposition to the proposed curriculum. Its objective, he argued, was not the teaching of writing skills, traditionally the object of the freshman composition course, but political indoctrination.

committee that designed and approved E 306, denies that the course was intended to brainwash students. The purpose, she says, was to teach argumentation through a series of readings relevant to the multicultural world the students would be living in.

The textbook adopted by the committee, she says, is very balanced, presenting arguments on all sides of issues.

"It was a cool treatment of a hot subject."

But opponents, including Dr. Gribben, charged that it would take a very brave freshman, indeed, to write an argument on behalf of — say — racial discrimination.

In the face of the controversy, the university canceled the new course.

Dr. Barbara Harlow, associate professor of English, charges that the course was canceled without "an open and public debate" and outside of normal academic procedures.

She characterizes the course as "democratic" and "participatory." Because of the way it was organized, she says, the faculty members and graduate assistants who teach the several hundred sections of freshman composition would have been working together, providing a system of checks and balances.

was organized around current topics, giving students an opportunity to participate in the continuing national debate on those topics.

"In fact, it gave students something to write about."

The July 1990 rally was held to protest the university's action.

"The student body president had her secretary summon me to defend myself," Dr. Gribben says. "But I decided not to go."

According to a report on the rally in *The Daily Texan*, the campus newspaper, speaker after speaker — most of them faculty members — denounced Dr. Gribben and others who had opposed the new curriculum.

One result, Dr. Gribben says, was a campaign of phone harassment.

"I kept thinking I would wake up, and none of this would have happened. Instead what I do is wake up to 2 a.m. phone pranks. I get as many as six hang-up calls a day on my answering machine."

Another opponent of E 306, Dr. John Ruskiewicz, says he also received crank calls in the weeks after the rally.

The whole debate has been bitter, Dr. Ruskiewicz says.

"There have been no shouting matches in the halls, but there has

faculty members."

He has no doubts at all that Dr. Gribben has suffered for his political stance on E 306 and other matters. "He hasn't been the only victim, but he has probably gotten more of it."

More important, he says, "the impact on other faculty members who would have been our allies is that they have been reduced to silence."

Officials in UT's English department now refuse to comment on the E 306 controversy or Dr. Gribben's role in it.

But Dr. Kimball says the whole thing has been blown out of proportion by Dr. Gribben and the media. "Various people have come up and made wild charges. These rather shrill voices have been allowed to prevail."

It's possible that Dr. Gribben feels he was shunned by members of the English faculty, she concedes.

"But I feel being shunned is a subjective experience."

Dr. Harlow says, "I find it very peculiar when people in power choose to represent themselves as victims."

Despite his complaints, she says, "he has been amply rewarded by the university in terms of salary and rank."

Although the new curriculum has been shelved for the moment, Dr. Gribben says the battle over the heart and soul of the English department is only beginning. And he is dropping out of that battle.

"If I continued to live here, I'd have to live under siege. We have an 8-year-old and a 5-year-old. You don't subject your family to that."

"I've had a lot of people say to me, 'You're leaving too soon. This has got to turn around.' But I live 80 percent of my time in that department. I walk those halls. People either recommend my courses, or they don't. They put me on Ph.D. committees, or they don't. And I am dead to my department."

And so, this August he'll become head of the English and philosophy department at Auburn University in Montgomery, Ala., a small campus where, he says, the emphasis is on teaching, and faculty has little time for political theorizing.

"I don't feel it now, but in a few years I may think this is the smartest thing I've ever done," he says.

"But right now, everything is packed up in boxes."