

**Presentation of the Trustees' Medal of Merit to
Frederick Sontag
Pomona College Commencement 2009
May 17, 2009**

Presented by Stewart Smith, Chairman of the Board of Trustees

Good morning. The Board of Trustees is periodically honored to award the Trustees' Medal of Merit to persons who have rendered outstanding service to Pomona or who have brought distinction to this institution through their actions or achievements. Today the Trustees are pleased to bestow such an award on Professor Frederick Sontag.

Fred Sontag is, by any measure, an extraordinarily magnanimous member of this community—one who has deeply affected generations of students at Pomona College, which has been his academic and spiritual home for 57 years. Born in Long Beach in 1924, Fred and his remarkable wife Carol arrived in Claremont in 1952 after he had graduated from Stanford University in 1949 and earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Yale University in 1951 and 1952.

Fred's academic discipline is philosophy, and the nature and breadth of his special interests—metaphysics, philosophy of religion, philosophical psychology, existentialism, and philosophical theology—are brilliantly reflected in the profoundly influential life he has led. He has been a gifted teacher and an insightful author of nearly 30 scholarly books, while contributing almost 100 essays and articles to major publications and more than 300 articles and opinion pieces to professional journals, magazines, and newspapers.

While Fred's faculty colleagues at Pomona and around the world have long celebrated his extraordinary scholarly achievements and the immense range of his academic interests in philosophy, religion, and literature, today we honor Fred Sontag for his compassionate mentorship and counseling of students. He has taught, guided, encouraged, and inspired thousands. He has contributed to the social fabric of this college by serving as adviser to the Kappa Delta fraternity for nearly five decades. His commitment to sustaining an appropriate academic and social environment for Pomona students—bolstered by his quiet and persuasive behind-the-scenes influence—has served the College well. For Fred, every student, however mischievous, is (as he would say) “really a good kid,” deserving of his generous support and guidance.

As a Pomona student, I was a member of the Sigma Tau fraternity, but my father, my brother, and my oldest son are all KDs (and I've had to live with that!). It is noteworthy that my brother and my son, separated by 30 years at Pomona, each benefited from a deep personal relationship with Fred Sontag. And I did as well, even though a Siggie, because Fred – an ordained minister – was the officiant at my marriage; he also presided at my brother's wedding (in South Africa) and at both of my sister's marriages. Fred always stays with a challenge until he gets it right!

In fact, Fred has married more than a hundred students and conducted myriad other ceremonies. He has come to know some of his students' children and even grandchildren, offering them the same big-hearted advice and encouragement. On sabbaticals, he is famous for visiting Pomona students and alumni around the world. No one at the College knows more about the lives of alumni—their pursuits, triumphs, and tragedies—than Fred.

In 1994, alumni initiated two projects honoring Fred Sontag, a research fellowship fund and the restoration and enhancement of the Greek Theatre. Both initiatives now bear his name. At that time, the organizers said: "Rarely in our lives does an individual come along who is able to provide us with such a multitude of gifts. Fred Sontag ... can see potential in others, display compassion with humor, motivate and influence; ... [Fred] is always there when most needed, helpful and nonjudgmental. . . . He is a teacher, adviser, mentor . . . in some cases colleague or minister . . . always a valued friend." Alumnus Stephen Pauley noted that "the gift of a second chance is one of Fred Sontag's greatest legacies at this college . . . What greater mentor in life can there be than the one who simply believes in you as a person—who believes in your potential to succeed?"

On behalf of the Board of Trustees of Pomona College, it is my honor to present the Trustees' Medal of Merit to Fred Sontag, longest-serving faculty member in the College's history, distinguished scholar, brilliant teacher, valued counselor and close friend, for the compassionate guidance and mentorship he has provided to Pomona's students and alumni for 57 years.