

STORY

OF A...

Bug Guru

STUART FULLERTON, 72, is the colorful keeper of UCF's Bug Closet, home to nearly half a million dearly departed specimens.

BY SARAH JUJSEN

"I can trace my interest in insects to at least the fourth grade, when my teacher brought in some live silkworms and I stole them. I got caught, so I had to feed those silkworms mulberries for the rest of the year. And somewhere around sixth grade, I was trying to raise termites in an aquarium in my bedroom. My parents got moderately coked at that."

Fullerton, a graduate of UCF, devoted his life to studying and collecting insects after retiring in 1990. In 1993, he moved his collection from his home to UCF and became a volunteer entomology lab instructor. Today, he maintains the Stuart M. Fullerton Collection of Arthropods with the help of student volunteers.

"I am putting numbers today on specimen number 481,225, and I figure that in the next year, we will probably hit 500,000 insects."

"My favorite group is the native bees, or hymenoptera. I've looked at bees for 20 years, but I work primarily with parasitic insects. It's really whatever I'm looking at in the moment."

"About 60 to 70 percent of our specimens are from campus and the five surrounding counties. We're noted around the world now. If you say 'bug closet,' and they're in the business, then they know."

"If all of the insects fell off the face of the earth in 30 seconds, in about a year we would be up over our heads in dead stuff because the insects are one of the major decomposing agents to get rid of all the junk that we accumulate."

"There are over a million different species of insects named and described in the world with maybe 6 million to 8 million more that are still being identified and described. They are the largest single group of living creatures. They run the world."

Hazards of being an insect enthusiast: "There's the story of me falling off the side of a mountain while chasing a butterfly, and there's the story of me almost hitting a tree because I was going down the road at 25 miles an hour with a bug net out the window trying to catch insects in the air and paying more attention to the net than the road."

"This is all volunteer work. Someday they will find my carcass and put it on a pin, put a number on it, and stick it in a cabinet. This is just what I do. Hitting a little white ball in a circle on a bunch of green grass with sand pits in it with an iron hammer is not exciting. So, no, I don't intend to retire. Neither do I know what I'm going to be when I grow up, so don't dare ask me that question." □



NORMA LOPEZ MOLINA