

From ‘Dr. Evil’ to hero maker: Philip Zimbardo

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After decades of notoriety for demonstrating one of social psychology’s fundamental tenets — how morally pliable most people are — Philip Zimbardo is understandably tired of being associated with the darker sides of human behavior.

“I really don’t want to be permanently labeled ‘Dr. Evil,’” Zimbardo said.

Yet the 85-year-old San Francisco psychologist, who taught at Stanford for 50 years and remains a go-to authority on topics such as shyness and the paradox of time as well as social coercion, knows that history has a way of flattening careers into one landmark accomplishment. For Zimbardo, that would be the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment.

As is well known to anyone who studied the infamous experiment in a Psych 101 course, as a young professor, Zimbardo devised a mock jail in the basement of Stanford’s Jordan Hall to study the psychology of imprisonment. Twenty-four volunteer students played the roles of guards and prisoners — until all hell broke loose (guards putting bags over prisoners’ heads, chaining their legs) and Zimbardo, the “warden,” abruptly cut the study short.