Furman suffers loss of three stalwart members of languages department

Furman University

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Furman suffers loss of three stalwart members of languages department

During a seven-week period in February and March, the university community was saddened by the deaths of three current and former members of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures: David W. Morgan, and emeriti David B. Parsell and Carey S. Crantford. In recognition of their years of service and contributions to the university, we offer these tributes.

CAREY CRANTFORD had a style all his own.

Maurice Cherry ’65, a sophomore when Crantford arrived at Furman and later a faculty colleague, once described how Crantford “immediately impressed students and colleagues alike with his enthusiasm for teaching and the magnitude of his interests. I recall hearing my peers label Carey variously as a Renaissance man and a Baroque personality. He intrigued us with his considerable knowledge of both popular culture and the more refined worlds of art, music and literature, and we were captivated by his off-the-wall, often irreverent sense of humor and ability to posit logical connections among ostensibly unrelated topics.”

When Crantford died March 11 at the age of 87, Furman lost one of its wittiest and most distinctive personalities — and one of its finest professors and scholars.

He held a number of positions during his 33-year Furman career (1962-95): professor of Spanish and German, longtime chair of the languages department, assistant academic dean, and winner of the 1972-73 Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching.

More informally he was known as the “Master of Furman’s Ceremonies,” a designation he earned because, for almost his entire tenure at Furman, he chaired the committee that planned all major academic events at the university, from convocations and graduations to three presidential inaugurations (Blackwell, Johns and Shi). His meticulous attention to detail and appreciation for pageantry and heraldry brought dignity and refinement to Furman’s special occasions.

He was also influential in developing Furman’s study away programs, and he was well known for his willingness to share his knowledge of language and culture with the community.

Peggy Ellison Good ’67, who in 2001 helped lead a drive to endow an academic chair in Crantford’s name — a position first held by Cherry — recalls how deftly her former professor reached out to students. “He had the uncanny ability to connect with each of us in a personal way,” she says. “We all had identifying nicknames, highlighting some personality trait or talent or just something he made up. He knew who in the class played football or basketball, who was starring in the next play, even who you sat with in the dining hall!”

“Dr. Crantford took great care to help his students see how all of life — the politics, the music, the art — permeated the literature of an era. He valued students, he loved the language, and he made what we were studying relevant.”

A celebration of Crantford’s life will be held at Furman November 9 during Homecoming Weekend. Memorials: Carey Shepard Crantford Endowed Chair at Furman.

“DAVID MORGAN is what those of us from the Midwest would call ‘a great guy.’ Saying someone is ‘a great guy’ is to call attention to that person’s magnanimity.

“He’s someone who is generous and thoughtful of others, someone you would like your parents or your sister to meet. A great guy is to be distinguished from ‘a heck of a guy’ — someone who has done something out of the ordinary, like bowling a 300 game or outrunning a police officer. And to be distinguished again from ‘a good guy,’ which mostly just means ‘friendly.’

“I mention these distinctions because they are the kinds of linguistic differences that would really have interested David. He loved words and meanings, no matter what the language. It was the kind of activity David partook of in his teaching, and even more so in his dictionary of modern Latin, the so-called Morgan Lexicon.”

This was how David Spear, William E. Leverette, Jr., Professor of History, began his eulogy at a memorial service for his friend and colleague, who died of a liver disorder February 6 at the age of 53.

Morgan was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of Wofford College who went on to earn a law degree from Vanderbilt. After practicing law in New York City for four years he returned to school at Princeton University, where he completed a doctorate in French literature. He joined the Furman faculty in 1994, and in 1998 he received the Alester G. Furman, Jr., and Janie Earle Furman Award for Meritorious Teaching.
In the last week of his life, Morgan’s former students filled the “French at Furman” Facebook page with testimonies to his warm, caring nature. Their comments described a mentor and friend who, in the words of Leanna Kelley Fuller ’06, had “an infectious love of learning, an amazing gift for teaching, [and] a spirit of deep kindness that just shone through all he said and did.”

Spear echoed those sentiments in recounting Morgan’s courage in his final days: “I watched David take a number of phone calls from friends while he lay in his hospital bed. And although it was difficult for him to talk, he spoke openly, warmly and candidly about his imminent death. Instead of being concerned about himself, he actually ministered to those he was talking with, putting them at ease, reminding them of their virtues.”

Spear closed by saying, “David Morgan was a great guy. He was a generous spirit both in his life and in his death.”

Memorials: Furman Chaplains Fund, or a charity of one’s choice.

David Parsell’s intellectual acuity and quirky style were well known among Furman French students from 1969-2008. His death March 29 at the age of 71 prompted the following reminiscence from writer George Singleton ’80:

“When I first sat down and watched the situation comedy “Seinfeld” back in the early nineties, I saw this character Kramer blow into the room and, after his first batch of dialogue, said to myself, “David Parsell.” Over the years I thought, well, Parsell is like Kramer, except Parsell is about 100 percent smarter than this character, and he has more heart, and he’s quicker and funnier by a mile.

Parsell influenced me — and I suspect every student he taught — in ways that I’ll never fathom. When he handed me a copy of Ionesco’s The Bald Soprano in the spring of 1977, he said something like, “You seem weird enough to enjoy this play.” And boy, did I. For some reason it never occurred to me that one could write comic work, whether plays, prose or poetry.

As the term continued Parsell pointed me toward other works by Ionesco, and then Samuel Beckett. This may be faulty memory, but I am convinced that he said — or at least thought — “You’re never going to be much of a French scholar, but you might understand the absurdity of life.”

Parsell, for me, was one of those rare professors whose chief strength fell into the “I do not want to disappoint this man” category. I tried to learn my verb conjugations. I spent a term in Versailles — a program he helped develop — even though I majored in philosophy. I took his course in 19th and 20th century French literature. I burst in on his other classes just to see how fast he could unravel himself from his preferred sitting position, atop the desk, in that double-jointed-at-the-hip manner usually perfected by yogis.

Being around Parsell was similar to being involved in an ongoing art happening. It was like being in the midst of a flash mob continually, long before flash mobs became de rigueur.

I showed him my bad, juvenile, plotless, slapstick attempts at plays and fiction. He never — never — made me feel as though a life of writing may be impossible.

I will miss those loud, booming “Ummma” that peppered his impeccable French, his genius English partner. In the afterlife, I hope that the Spirit in charge finds it necessary to say, “You know, we tried to use you for a template when it came to having writers create smart, hilarious characters. They couldn’t pull it off. Here’s a trophy, though, for you being you.”

Memorials: Greenville Humane Society, or a charity of one’s choice.

Thorpe takes reins at history museum

Dana Thorpe, who has more than 28 years of experience working in museums and historical societies, has been appointed executive director of the Upcountry History Museum-Furman.

Thorpe was previously executive director of the Building for Kids Children’s Museum in Appleton, Wis. She has also been director of the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio, director of exhibits at the John G. Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, and deputy director of the Association of Children’s Museums, an international service organization.

Furman and the museum became partners in February of 2012, when the university assumed responsibility for the museum’s operation and management. The museum is located in downtown Greenville near the site of the Greenville Woman’s College; its board of directors owns the facilities and provides membership and fundraising support. Museum staff members are Furman employees.

Furman president Rod Smolla said, “We are pleased to have a person of Dana’s caliber in this position and are confident that the Upcountry History Museum under her leadership will strengthen its role as a cultural and educational resource in new and exciting ways.”

Smolla and Kathy McKinney, chair of the museum’s board, also expressed appreciation for the work of Ken Johnson, who served as interim executive director since July of 2011.