Thorpe takes reins at history museum

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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 ’96, 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 Parrsall.” Over the years I thought, well, Parrsall is like Kramer, except Parrsall is about 100 percent smarter than this character, and he has more heart, and he’s quicker and funnier by a mile.

Parrsall 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 Parrsall 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.”

Parrsall, 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 Parrsall 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 “Umms” 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 had served as interim executive director since July of 2011.