

9-1-2010

Prior remembered for wit, compassion, dedication to teaching

Jim Stewart
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Stewart, Jim (2010) "Prior remembered for wit, compassion, dedication to teaching," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 53 : Iss. 3 , Article 22.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol53/iss3/22>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

Prior remembered for wit, compassion, dedication to teaching

AS THE FALL SEMESTER BEGAN, Furman was saddened by the sudden death of Richard Prior, associate professor of classics. He died August 24 at age 47 of complications from pneumonia.

A native of Syracuse, N.Y., Prior, who had taught at Furman since 1994, was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of North Carolina-Greensboro and held a Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo. He was the author of five books, including *501 Latin Verbs*, considered a seminal work in the field.

Prior was known for his generous nature, razor-sharp wit and widespread interests. In a tribute, his departmental colleagues said, “His students will remember his self-deprecating humor, his love of culture from the very high (Livy, Vergil) to the very, very low (velvet Elvis, bad movies from the 1960s), and his willingness to share his life’s adventures and innumerable enthusiasms (his dogs, oenology, re-enacting the Civil War, Asian cooking).

“They will also remember his uncompromising dedication to teaching and his tireless scholarship on the pedagogy of Latin. Mostly, they will remember his ability to reach out to students who needed a counselor or simply a friend, and the fierce loyalty and boundless generosity he offered with an open heart.”

Mike Williams ’99 was one of those students. As a freshman Latin student under Prior for three terms in 1995-96, Williams discovered common ground with his teacher, including roots in the Northeast and a passion for the National Hockey League.

“We would find ourselves arguing before, after and during class about whether the [Boston] Bruins or the [Buffalo] Sabres would come out on top,” Williams writes. “Dr. Prior would often show up to class wearing his Sabres jersey, which only made me wear my Bruins jersey more often.



For a kid in foreign country, it felt nice to be able to relate to somebody, even if he was a Sabres fan!”

At the end of winter term that year, Williams developed mononucleosis. The illness forced him to miss the first week of spring classes and, combined with other issues, made him question whether he should remain at Furman.

When he stopped by Prior’s office one afternoon shortly after his return, he recalls the professor greeting him with, “I’m worried about you, Michael. You’ve had a tough year, and you look like hell!”

Then, for the next hour, they talked. Prior shared stories about his own college struggles and of adjusting to life in the South.

Williams writes, “At that moment I recognized that what I was experiencing was not foreign, that others had been through what I had been through and had survived. I don’t recall saying more than 10 words in that meeting, but I felt like the weight of the world was off my shoulders.

“That day left an indelible mark on me. Dr. Prior’s ability to connect on a human level with a lost and lonely student seemed so effortless for him. That he could sit in his office, or with an

entire classroom of students, and relate stories about his personal successes and triumphs made him real.

“Looking back, it is easy to see what made him such a phenomenal teacher. He was a person without pretense. What you saw was what you got.”

Illana Fisher Burkhart ’99 also recalls Prior’s compassionate nature. During a study abroad trip to Italy with Prior, she and some friends rescued a stray puppy and “smuggled” it along on a tour of the ruins at Pompeii. They hovered near the back of the group to

try to avoid being caught, but as the puppy grew restless, it became a distraction to everyone, including the professor.

Burkhart writes, “Finally Dr. Prior couldn’t stand it any longer and came to investigate. I just knew from the look on his face that we were toast, but as soon as he saw the puppy and realized what was going on, his face melted and all was forgiven.

“Today,” she adds, “I can’t remember the difference between declensions and conjugations, but I will never forget that Cicero means chick-pea, where to find the best veal saltimbocca in Rome, Dr. Prior’s hockey jerseys, and how he would purse his lips and his face would turn bright red when he laughed.”

Richard Prior is survived by his partner, Scott Henderson; his parents, Edmon Prior and Stella Beaulieu; and two sisters. Memorials: Greenville Humane Society, 328 Furman Hall Road, Greenville, S.C. 29609.

— JIM STEWART

Photo of Richard Prior (left) and colleague Vic Greene taken by Illana Fisher Burkhart in Egypt in 1999. Prior had purchased the head scarves from the Bedouin boy.