

1-1-2009

Kerstetter had the true passion for art of teaching

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Recommended Citation

Snyder, John (2009) "Kerstetter had the true passion for art of teaching," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 51 : Iss. 3 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol51/iss3/18>

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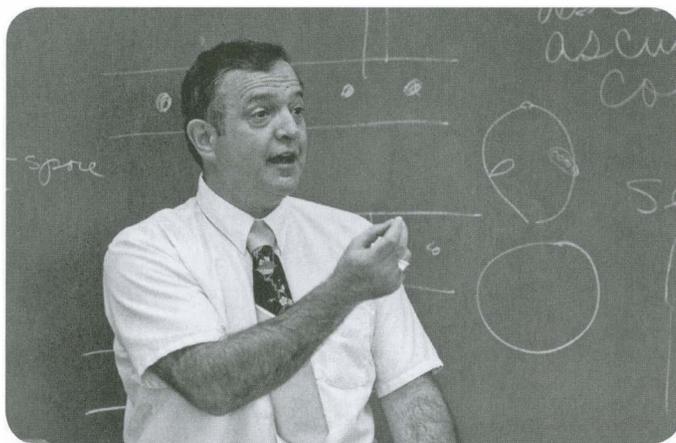
Kerstetter had true passion for art of teaching

“Well, Boy Howdy!” That’s how Rex Eugene Kerstetter might start this reminiscence, reminding us of his deep roots in Kansas. And those words came to my mind when I heard of his sudden death on September 19.

When I came to Greenville in 1971, Rex was only recently arrived from Ph.D. work at Florida State, but he had already established a beautiful yard around his home. We purchased a freshly built house on the same block, and it badly needed plantings. Rex became my on-call horticulturalist, providing advice and many plants and cuttings; he was applying his childhood farming experience along with his formal training as a plant physiologist. Although his research was primarily at the cellular and sub-cellular levels, he never lost his love of the soil. (“Not dirt!” he would exclaim.)

He was a professional botanist at every level. He explored invisibly small molecules within plants, was a master at persuading plant tissues to grow in artificial cultures, and taught generations of students about the ecological interactions of entire plant communities. His work with plant enzymes found its way into important publications and earned him the opportunity to make scholarly presentations on four continents.

Rex promoted the concept of engaged learning long before the term had become a Furman watchword. He understood that the best teaching occurs when a teacher demonstrates the research enterprise and then lets the student take over. Way back in 1970 a student was a co-author with Rex of a paper published in a respected scientific journal. Nearly every ensuing year — until Rex retired in 2000 — at least one student (and often more) working in Rex’s lab produced a similar publication or presentation.



Rex truly had a passion for teaching. And he knew that he was profoundly influencing the future by guiding budding health professionals, research scientists and those who would in turn teach others.

He was deeply engaged on many levels in advancing the education enterprise. He helped start Greenville County’s gifted and talented program, was on the board of directors of Roper Mountain Science Center, was a grader of Advanced Placement biology tests, and was active in organizing workshops for Advanced Placement teachers.

But his interests and expertise went far beyond biological topics. Consider this story: One of his younger departmental colleagues would sometimes visit his office with a question about biology, or perhaps where to find some lab item. Now, Rex almost always had his radio tuned to the local classical music station. His colleague wouldn’t be allowed to ask her question until she told him the name of the piece that was playing. If she didn’t provide the right answer, a mini-lecture would follow, with Rex describing the composer and style of the music.

Then, finally, she could ask her question. Rex was a scholar and teacher of many things.

He was also a caring, sensitive, compassionate gentleman. As just one example, a colleague describes how Rex was the first person able to help her begin grieving upon the death of a loved one, simply by giving her a shoulder to cry on.

Although recently plagued by ill health, Rex was able to visit the newly completed Charles H. Townes Center for Science just days before his death. We only wish he had survived to celebrate the formal dedication of the center October 31.

Rex Kerstetter belonged at such an event because of the role he played in advancing the biology department and the university from 1967 to 2000. His work endures in the minds and careers of hundreds of Furman graduates.

— **JOHN SNYDER**
Professor of Biology

Memorials: Rex Kerstetter Memorial Fund, Furman University, Greenville, S.C. 29613.