In tribute: Economist Ray Roberts, 1929-2006

Richard A. Stanford '65

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Ray Crouse Roberts, Jr., professor of economics at Furman from 1969 to 1994 and acting vice president for academic affairs and dean in 1994-95, died May 5 while visiting his son Mark in Hamilton, Va. He was 77.

An avid runner in earlier years, Ray worked out regularly and was in fine health until he collapsed of a "heart event" while helping his daughter-in-law with yard work. Son Eric says that on the day Ray died, he had enjoyed a wonderful visit with Mark’s children and that “his last day couldn’t have been better if it were scripted.”

Born in Burlington, N.C., Ray earned his bachelor’s degree in economics from Duke University and a master’s and Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina. In the early 1950s he served on active duty in the Marine Corps and remained in the Marine Corps Reserves until the late 1970s, retiring with the rank of colonel.

Before coming to Furman, Ray, known to family members as “Bob,” taught at Old Dominion, North Carolina and Duke, and was the first dean of the School of Business Administration at Winthrop. He was appointed the Frederick W. Symmes Professor of Economics upon his arrival at Furman in 1969.

An able administrator, he chaired the Department of Economics and Business Administration for three terms, during which he oversaw the implementation of the “new curriculum” introduced in the late '60s and was instrumental in strengthening the economics, business administration and accounting curricula.

Ray was admired by colleagues and students alike. Chris Borch ’78, a California businessman, recalls earning his first “A” at Furman in Ray’s class.

“Dr. Roberts helped open for me a love of learning,” Chris says. “During my senior year, Dr. Roberts was my advisor and encouraged me to apply to the Wharton School for graduate study. To my surprise, I got in — largely, I’m sure, due to a letter Dr. Roberts wrote for me to a former teaching colleague who was on Wharton’s admissions committee. When I look back over the years since I was a freshman in Dr. Roberts’ class, I realize that he was instrumental in helping me find my way in life.”

In addition to his duties as department chair and dean, Ray became intimately familiar with the workings of the university by serving on most of its important faculty and administrative committees. In the process, he culled this piece of wisdom: “The less I know about what goes on around here, the happier I am.”

Ray was active in the Southern Economic Association and the Industrial Relations Research Association. He served for many years as the business manager/treasurer of the Piedmont Economic Club and was frequently called upon to act as a consultant in the Carolinas and Virginia on textile industry industrial engineering matters and labor issues.

Ray was also generous to the university he served so capably. A few years back, when he was closing out his tree farm in northern Greenville County, he donated hundreds of young trees that are now planted all over the Furman campus. During its spring meeting, the board of trustees voted to recognize Ray’s generosity by naming the road leading from the Lay Physical Activities Center to South Housing “Ray Roberts Lane.”

Upon his retirement, Ray gave me a collection of classic economics texts. This collection, displayed in a bookcase in the Economics, Business and Accounting suite, now serves as a lasting memorial to him.

I would be remiss if I did not mention Ray’s love of chocolate — in candy, cake or ice cream. And he had an endearing way of remembering the birthdays of his Furman colleagues, even after his retirement.

Phil Winstead, retired director of institutional research at Furman, says, “With Ray it was more than just being academic colleagues. It was genuine friendship that developed over more than 25 years. It was going to Travelers Rest for a hot dog at lunch time. It was his truck and helping all three of our daughters move furniture from one apartment to another. It was his never saying no when help, professional or personal, was asked of him. Ray was a true friend.”

In addition to his wife, Alice, of 11 Rainstone Drive, Greenville 29615, Ray Roberts is survived by sons David, Eric ’81 and Mark; daughter Rebecca Folkers; five grandchildren; and a brother.

— Richard A. Stanford ’65

David C. Garrett, Jr., Professor of Economics