

In Memoriam: Duane Whittier '50

He was UNH's longest-tenured professor

Wednesday, March 20, 2019

•
•
•



Like most of his fellow members of the UNH class of 1950, Duane Whittier arrived on the Durham campus in the fall of 1946. Unlike any of them, however, it was 70 years later when he left, retiring in 2016 from the UNH philosophy department where he'd spent five decades of his distinguished teaching career.

It wasn't the most auspicious of starts. Duane spent his first two weeks of college sleeping on the gym floor in New Hampshire Hall because his dorm — Englehardt Hall — wasn't ready for occupancy when the school year began. Entering UNH as New Hampshire's reigning high school debate champion, Duane quickly found a home in the

social sciences, and he long credited psychology professor George Haselrud as well as Donald Babcock, UNH's lone philosophy professor during his undergraduate years, for directing him toward graduate school and a career in teaching.

After UNH, the Lebanon, New Hampshire, native joined the U.S. Air Force, serving in the Korean War, and, following a brief foray into graduate studies in experimental psychology, went on to earn his doctorate in philosophy from the University of Illinois. He taught at Illinois and later Penn State before returning to New Hampshire in 1967 to take a position with his alma mater.

Along the way, Duane inspired students like Robert Scharff, who took a class with him at Illinois and later joined him as a member of the philosophy faculty at UNH. "What Duane 'taught' me in that first course," Scharff recalled years later, "is that good philosophy, for all its jargon and fancy arguments and ambitious topics, ultimately deserves to be conveyed straightforwardly, with as few frills as possible." One of Duane's favorite approaches was to take a deliberately provocative or unpopular point of view and challenge his students to talk him out of it. He was less interested in getting students to align with a particular point of view than he was in the give-and-take of philosophical inquiry and the honing of their critical-thinking skills.

Duane met his wife, Joan, while he was working on his doctorate and she was earning her master's degree at the University of Illinois. They were married in 1960 and had celebrated nearly six decades together when Joan died in 2017. The couple didn't have children but enjoyed a close relationship with Joan's nephew Jim Graham '75 and his wife Becky, who fondly referred to the pair as "Auntie" and "Unc."

"Jim was a skier, so his parents shipped him out to Auntie and Unc so he could ski competitively and still be near family for college," Becky recalls. Some years later, Duane spent a summer in Idaho with the Grahams, after which he and Joan considered relocating to be near them. "Then Unc visited us in the winter and that was the end of that," Becky laughs.

The Whittiers also regarded the UNH community as family and spent many fulfilling hours attending what Duane once estimated were hundreds of musical performances on campus put on by both student groups and campers from SYMS, UNH's summer youth music school. Indeed, the couple's dedication to the UNH music program was such that they left a significant bequest gift for the music department. The Duane & Joan Whittier Music Fund will provide scholarships for undergraduate students majoring in music and will also support youth attending SYMS.

Though he often said he intended to make it to 50 years of teaching at UNH, Duane had to retire in 2016, one year shy of his goal, after being diagnosed with the cancer to which he succumbed on Sept. 3, 2018. Asked at the time what kept him in the classroom for so long — 49 years at UNH, plus another nine split between Illinois and Penn State — he responded, "I was paid for 58 years to do my hobby. Why would I ever give that up?"

- WRITTEN BY:



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.
The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).
Email us: unhtoday.editor@unh.edu.

[MANAGE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION](#) [CONTACT US](#)

Like us on Facebook

Follow us on Twitter

Follow us on YouTube

Follow us on Instagram

Find us on LinkIn

UNH Today RSS feeds

UNH Today • UNH Main Directory: 603-862-1234
Copyright © 2021 • TTY Users: 7-1-1 or 800-735-2964 (Relay NH)
[USNH Privacy Policies](#) • [USNH Terms of Use](#) • [ADA Acknowledgement](#)