On March 11, 2009, the English Department lost one of its finest scholars and teachers. More importantly, it lost a friend when Al Labriola died of heart failure at his condominium in Florida.

While in recent years Al Labriola spent much of his time on the second floor of College Hall, where he served the University, superbly, as acting dean of the McAnulty College and Graduate School, he was never far away from the English Department. Members of the Department could find him daily on the sixth floor singing to the secretaries, talking with graduate students about their course work and research projects, and discussing professional matters with faculty colleagues. Officially he was our dean, but first and foremost he was our friend and colleague, who dedicated his life to the education of students and to serving the Department that he loved. Indeed, for him, his work on behalf of the English Department was no work at all, but rather—to judge by his unwavering good cheer—a joy of the first order. His smile brought light to the Department; his playful banter created a culture of warmth and collegiality; and his vast knowledge and indefatigable energy enriched the quality of intellectual life among his colleagues.

Al Labriola will be remembered for his selfless and generous spirit. His office door was always open to students and faculty members alike, and no issue was too small, or too large, for his attention. Whether a beginning undergraduate student wished to speak with him about course selection, or a senior professor wished to inquire of him about an obscure literary source, he was equally pleased to be of service. And the service he provided was always to the point. No one knew the standards, policies and procedures of the University better than he, and no one possessed a comparable range of knowledge in the areas of literature, theology, and the fine arts. He was known to all of us for his unsurpassed memory and breadth of reading; he was known as a resource for all members of the University on virtually any topic; and, most importantly, he was known for his willingness and desire to put his knowledge into service for others.

His enormous professional accomplishments would be stunning for someone who spent his days and years holed up in a library. But when those accomplishments are measured against his tireless work as a teacher, colleague, and dean—that is, against his constant presence in the Department and College—they are even more
remarkable. He lectured across the globe on Milton; he edited a top-tier book series on Renaissance studies; he published original and influential essays in the leading journals on Milton, Shakespeare, and Donne; he edited the major journal in the area of Milton studies; and he edited numerous collections of essays by the premier scholars in English studies. Even after he became seriously ill with colon cancer, he continued writing almost non-stop, producing three very long and important essays in a three-month period on Donne, Milton, and the Bible.

Few individuals have enjoyed a career at Duquesne as long and as distinguished as Al Labriola. He graduated from Duquesne in 1961; after completing his graduate studies, a stint in the military and a brief period of teaching at the College of William and Mary, he joined the

English Department here in 1970. Over the past 40 years, he defined himself always by his ability to serve the institution, his students, and his colleagues. The awards that he won for excellence in scholarship, teaching, and service are only a small indicator of his dedication; only his steady, daily work over 40 years can tell the true story of his contributions.

Al Labriola was a towering presence in the English Department, and he will long continue to be such. He set the bar of academic excellence very high, and we will be guided by his example for years to come. But, much more than his distinguished record of scholarly accomplishment, the community that makes up the English Department will remember his warm heart, his generous spirit, and his tireless work on behalf of his students and colleagues.
In February, the English Department welcomed author John Keeble, considered to be one of the foremost writers in the U.S. Northwest. Keeble is a prize-winning fiction writer and journalist who received a Master of Fine Arts degree from Brown University in 1973. Up until about a year ago, Keeble served as a Professor Emeritus at Eastern Washington University, where he founded the Master of Fine Arts program.

John Keeble has had a number of works published, including his novels, Yellowfish (Harper and Row, 1980), Broken Ground (Harper and Row, 1987), which was cited as one of the Hundred Books in Literary Oregon by the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, and a collection of stories called Nocturnal America (University of Nebraska Press, 2006), which won the Prairie Schooner Prize fiction award.

During his visit, Keeble gave a reading in the Power Center Ballroom. One of the Department’s doctoral students, Michelle Gaffey, attended and had this to say:

John Keeble read excerpts from several of his novels and a short story from his collection, Nocturnal America. His fiction is attentive to place, and his attention to detail is stunning: In “Zeta’s House,” which he read in its entirety at the fiction reading, he works to highlight the silence in a particular space by beautifully documenting the sounds of birds singing and calling—and how these birds both call attention to and interrupt such incredible silence. Much of Keeble’s fiction was described by audience members as “documentary” or “like a road or travel narrative,” and he was generally viewed by his listeners as an expert in showing his story and its details.

Keeble also conducted a lecture and discussion titled “The Known and the Imagined, Fact and Fiction.” Another of the Department’s doctoral students, Beth Buhot, attended and gave this account:

(Keeble) lectured on the line between fact and fiction. One memorable aspect of his presentation was his idea of a contract between the writer and reader—that there should be trust between the reader and writer. A lively Q and A followed. In response to a question about what to do with texts that deliberately challenge the reader’s efforts to make sense of the text, Keeble suggested that experimental fiction has a specific audience that, in perhaps some ways, expects these challenges. In response to questions about controversial (partly fabricated) recent memoirs, Keeble suggested that there is no justification for breaking this contract of trust.

---

Timothy Bintrim (Ph.D. 2004), assistant professor of English at Saint Francis University, will be presenting a pedagogically focused paper at the 2009 College English Association conference in Pittsburgh, March 26–28. The title is “Fireproof Quilts, Indestructible Benches: Problems of Design in Alice Walker’s ‘Everyday Use.’”


Ellen Foster (Ph.D. 2005), assistant professor of English at Clarion University-Venango Campus, presented “Valuing Virtue: Sedgwick’s Clarence and a Legacy from the British West Indies” at the 6th Biennial Conference of the Society of Early Americanists in Hamilton, Bermuda, March 2009. Ellen is also completing her term as co-chair of the Clarion University Presidential Commission on the Status of Women.

Elizabeth Rich (Ph.D. 1999) is currently an associate professor of English at Saginaw Valley State University in Michigan, and she recently had an article published in The Global Studies Journal (2008, 1.4), titled “Borzog Mishi Yadet Mire: The U.S. University in Moth Smoke and Dakhmeh.”

The poet John Donne, in his “Holy Sonnet” addressed to Death, recalls this sad paradox: “And soonest our best men with thee doe goe.” The line’s adverbial superlative refers not to duration, for we know that good people are often long-lived. Even so, Donne reminds us, they can never live long enough. The poet’s temporal description, then, captures something not only of time but also of the sudden and disorienting shock that accompanies the death of those people we most dearly love and most deeply respect. Until the moment we learn of their passing, we never really allow ourselves to conceive of the world without them in it, a world too soon and too drastically changed through the loss of their virtues—even as, Donne believes, those very virtues that make our sudden earthly loss so difficult to bear carry them, the lost, most swiftly to their reward in the life to come. Albert C. Labriola was by any standard one of our best men; thus, he has left us soonest.

I find myself most often remembering and reflecting upon Dr. Labriola’s profound generosity. There was no bit of his encyclopedic knowledge of life and letters that he was unwilling to share in the classroom, by phone or e-mail, or through his perpetually open office door. He was quietly selfless in a profession too replete with clamoring selves—lecturing quietly, examining quietly, editing quietly, helping quietly. I have come to believe, through my three years of privileged and cherished experience working with him (always with, he insisted—never for, as I deferentially but proudly told anyone who asked what I did for a living), that Dr. Labriola was in part crafted his own brilliant career as a scholar of the highest order so that he might help others by virtue of his reputation and influence. His several co-authors, co-editors, co-teachers, as well as the dozens upon dozens of scholars and critics whose manuscripts he guided into print by way of Milton Studies and the Duquesne University Press’s Medieval and Renaissance Literary Studies series offer proof of his scholarly generosity. Thousands of grateful students from every level of collegiate study can attest to his passionate vocational generosity. I, for one will never forget, nor can I ever fully repay, the personal generosity Dr. Labriola showed me—through his patient, considered, often unvarnished, but always-caring mentorship. As a result, I can say honestly that I have known true generosity, and I mourn its too-soon diminution in this world as I mourn him, my dear mentor.

That in Dr. Labriola’s honor I might begin to be generous in return, to help as I was helped, I dedicate the remainder of my studies to him—recalling another passage from Donne, from “Obsequies to the Lord Harrington,” which I learned at his hands:

If looking up to God; or downe to us, Thou findest that any way is pervious, Twixt heav’n and earth, and that man’s actions doe Come to your knowledge, and affections too, See, and with joy, mee to that good degree Of goodnesse growne, that I can study thee, And, by these meditations refin’d, Can unapparell and enlarge my minde, And so can make by this soft extasie, This place a map of heav’n, my selfe of thee.

Matthew Vickless

Dr. Labriola was someone that I admired beyond words, not only because he was a world-renowned scholar and distinguished professor but also because he was one of the best people that I have ever met. Beneath his witty and proud exterior, Dr. Labriola was a humble, patient, generous, gracious and selfless man. Everything he did was in service to those around him, and he approached virtually every aspect of his life with a perfect balance of wisdom, devotion, earnestness, and humor. As I reflect on just a few of the many ways in which he influenced my life, I hope to honor the man who was my “rock,” my mentor, and my dear friend.

As Dr. Labriola’s research assistant, I got a chance to spend almost seven years of my graduate career assisting one of the most respected and accomplished scholars in his field. One of the first things I learned was that he was not the least bit technologically savvy: I spent a good portion of my time assisting him with computer problems, which varied from his inability to figure out why his mouse—which he accidentally unplugged—stopped working, to how to send his grandson an e-card, to how to fill out an online recommendation form for a student. Technological difficulties aside, I always felt challenged but respected while working with him. I knew that he trusted me completely with any task that he assigned to me, which was the greatest compliment of all. He constantly pushed me beyond my limits and encouraged me to acknowledge my own abilities, instilling in me the desire to always succeed and to never give up.

Dr. Labriola also served as my mentor, listening to what he referred to as my “persistent whining” about teaching issues, helping me to perfect applications, resumes, and dissertation chapters, and answering my questions about academia. Over the years, he devoted much time to helping me to become a confident instructor and scholar. He constantly encouraged me, provided me wisdom and support, and patiently reassured me that he believed in me. Through his guidance and example, I learned the most valuable lessons on teaching and research from an outstanding professor and scholar. I will spend the rest of my academic career applying those lessons, and I am determined to become the teacher and scholar that he believed I could be.
Above all, Dr. Labriola was my dear friend and confidante. In the many years that we worked together, I trusted him with countless professional and personal concerns, and he confided in me as well. Ultimately, I was blessed with the rare opportunity to know the man behind the monogrammed turtlenecks, Kenneth Branagh cufflinks, safari golf shirts, and Jerry Garcia neckties; he told me about his childhood, the Vietnam War, and his life beyond academia; he sent me detailed e-mails about his travels (including in-depth descriptions of the weather and the flora and fauna); he asked me to explain any pop culture references that he didn’t understand; he involved me in the elaborate jokes that he played on other graduate students; and, if he needed an opinion about something, which was rare, of course, he asked me. In friendship, we formed an infamous “odd couple”—the distinguished, stoic, proper professor and his quirky, high-strung, emotional sidekick—and we got along famously. We were, in many ways, a perfect mismatch.

Dr. Labriola used to demand, always jokingly, that I “get out of the nest” and “spread my wings.” He would wag his finger at me, stating in his most serious voice: “Your sense of self should not be dependent upon how Dr. Labriola feels about you.” In all honesty, I am incredibly proud that my sense of self is inextricably linked to him: his wisdom, his guidance, and his friendship form its very foundation. And, while Dr. Labriola has taught me how to spread my wings and survive without him, I still miss my very dear friend every day.

Amy Crinity Phillips

Labriola Memorial Library Fund

“Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world.” – John Milton

After nearly four decades of teaching at Duquesne, Dr. Albert C. Labriola introduced the great works of Milton, Shakespeare, and others to thousands of students. Some of these women and men followed in Dr. Labriola’s footsteps as scholars; many others pursued successful careers in a variety of fields; yet his passionate teaching and research enlightened them all. Decades later, countless numbers of alumni can associate pivotal moments in their lives with passages from the enduring works of literature he explored and explained. In deep gratitude, we aim to keep his spirit alive.

The English Department and the Gumberg Library are establishing the Dr. Albert C. Labriola Memorial Library Fund. This endowment will be used to support perpetually the purchase of volumes, which will be recommended by the English Department faculty and housed in the library’s collection.

Your reverent expression of thanks through a donation to this fund will extend Dr. Labriola’s love for learning, sparking transcendent moments of awe for generations of students to come.

For more information or to contribute to the Labriola Memorial Library Fund, please contact:

Bernadette Krueger
Associate Director, Annual Giving
401 Administration Building
Duquesne University
600 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15282

412.396.4936
krueger@duq.edu

Amy Crinity Phillips

Much Ado
English Alumni Remember
Dr. Albert Labriola

During the first week of Dr. Labriola’s Milton class, I was impressed by his willingness to deconstruct his considerable authority as a Distinguished Professor. He could describe himself as “Dr. Al the kiddies’ pal” one moment and quote Paradise Lost from memory, then add the paragraph and page number in our edition while visualizing the text in the air, the next. One day he explained his “patter” with which he kept us regaled as he found his place in his lecture notes, which were few. We who were future professors were imbibing his teaching style as we studied Milton. He was willing to help any graduate student, even Americanists such as Ellen Foster and myself, on involved projects such as the Willa Cather centennial gathering in 1996. Doors opened all over campus whenever he made a phone call for us!

Timothy Bintrim, Ph.D., 2004

Dr. Al was teaching a Shakespeare class in the lecture room on the bottom floor of College Hall. At some point after we had taken the quiz that separated the wheat from the chaff, something unusual happened. The room had a dropped ceiling, and there was a crack between two of the tiles. Apparently, a mouse had been scurrying along and didn’t notice the gap, so it ended up falling onto a desk, landing right by a student and scurrying to the floor. Cries of “A mouse!” rippled through the room as people pulled their legs up onto their seats, and a few young men jumped up (to hunt the mouse?). Dr. Al stayed in the front of the room and began wryly commenting (though, I think, never as much as to “Johnny”). Reading King Lear or Hamlet with the class, he would stop, gaze wistfully, and remark, “My one great regret in life is that I did not write this play.”

Dr. Labriola continually combined good humor and love with exacting demands. When I gave him a chapter of my dissertation, it came back within hours, covered in red marks that insisted I clean up my thinking, my syntax, my act. When as an ABD, I tested the job market and—fortunately—received an offer from a community college (to teach composition and the occasional lit survey) and one from a four-year university (to teach Shakespeare, including at the graduate level), he looked me in the eye and said, “And wherein lies the dilemma?” He knew the career path for which he had helped prepare me and even—I think—wanted me to be aware of a level of Providence not to be gainsaid.

I had never expected to need Dr. Al’s advice again, but now I find that I miss him sorely. I realize how much of his guidance I imbibed and use each day that I work and teach. And yes, I credit him (at least in my heart) every time I say, “My one great regret in life is that I did not write this play.”

Douglas King, Ph.D., 2002

Of the many gifts that Dr. Al Labriola bestowed upon his students, among the greatest was his passion for reading. Reading aloud, Al forced you to engage every note in a line’s melody. His voice would rise and fall, like a soft breeze, captivating listeners when he hugged to a whisper. His loving articulation made his favorite lines from Milton yours as well. I’ll always remember the way that he read Milton’s description of the majestic trees that surrounded Eden: “Insuperable height of loftiest shade …”; I could have sworn that Al wrote this himself. As a formalist interpreter, Al was peerless. His reading of Donne’s “Air and Angels” may stand as the most painstaking word-by-word explication ever published. He treated literary analysis like everything else in his rich life and career: nothing could be ignored and all merited concerted attention. We serve Al Labriola’s memory best when we ignite this passion in our own students.

Dennis McDaniel, Ph.D. 1993

I read with great sorrow that Dr. Albert C. Labriola, professor of English at Duquesne University, had passed away on Wednesday, March 11, 2009. For those of us who knew “Dr. Al,” this is a sad occasion. His work as a scholar, educator, and administrator must be included among the greatest in Duquesne’s long history of excellence. Dr. Al was passionate about his work, about the study and teaching of literature, and his efforts have touched thousands of students and scholars. For me, Dr. Al was a teacher, a mentor, the best possible reference, and, finally, a friend.

“Dr. Al the kiddies’ pal,” as he often called himself in his classes, was my first teaching mentor at Duquesne. After skating through my undergrad degree, I was awarded a teaching fellowship and was
expected to take two classes and teach two classes each semester. Having never been in front of a classroom, I was not sure what to expect. I had a vague idea of what I wanted to accomplish, a textbook, and a really tight schedule for the first three weeks of the term. Not much else. All of the new teaching fellows had to take a brief course on Teaching College English, but that could not prepare a new instructor for the myriad questions, issues, and problems lurking ahead. I certainly needed a mentor.

Dr. Al and I first met during the third week of the term. I was taking a class with Dr. Al that semester, so I knew his style. Talk about being intimidated. Here I was, a young, inexperienced, and not very well-dressed student talking to one of the top professors at Duquesne, a well-published scholar who was president—or something—of the Milton Society, a man who was impeccably dressed in a grey suit, red tie, and cufflinks. We met in his remarkably clean office. We talked a bit, and I told him my plan for the class. He made a few comments and asked if I had a question. I most dreaded: “When can I talk to you?”

“Wednesday?” he asked.

It was Monday. “How about Wednesday?” he asked. On Wednesday, when I got to the classroom, Dr. Al was already sitting in the back corner, grinning that slight grin of his, dressed, of course to the nines, ready to watch me crash. I had spent the past two days preparing and was armed with enough questions, exercises, and examples for three weeks of classes. The students filed in, and all noticed the professional seat in the back of the room. Once all had arrived, I asked them to pay attention to the amateur in front. To my delight and surprise, the class went well. The students had all read the material, and they seemed eager to discuss. Perhaps it was my preparation, perhaps it was the subject, or perhaps they felt they needed to perform their best. Whatever the reason, I was grateful. During one brief ill in our discussion, Dr. Al, excited to participate, volunteered an answer. We met after class, and over the course of that year, Dr. Al sat in on several more classes. He evaluated my essay topics, he looked at the papers I graded, and we met intermittently to discuss my progress and problems.

During that year, I learned a lot and changed a lot. I was on time, I started to dress better, and I realized I needed to know my subject inside out. More importantly, I learned not to be afraid to learn something new from my students. All of them, Dr. Al once said to me, have something to teach. I also learned that a teacher must have high expectations for his or her students and must do everything possible to help them reach those expectations. And I learned to be professional as a teacher, scholar, and administrator, but to do so with a sense of humor and with a joy for the subject and my students.

At the end of the year, Dr. Al wrote for me a letter of recommendation that I cherish. We had spoken at length about generating discussions in class, and about how my methods differed from his. In this letter, he paid me one of the greatest compliments I ever received. He wrote, “Jim in his manner is about 180 degrees from my own; still he succeeds, in some ways more effectively than me…. I rate Jim very highly as a teacher.”

During my many years at Duquesne, Dr. Al and I became friends. I could always go to him if I had questions, and he was always supportive of my pursuits. He also loved my wife Angel, who was also lucky to have him as a professor. In fact, he came to our wedding at the Duquesne Chapel in 1997. At my dissertation defense in 2003, Dr Al was present, of course. After so many years, I would finally be finished. I was so nervous. After the introductory part, the faculty took turns asking questions. Dr. Al was first. Here was the same feeling I felt 13 years earlier. His first comment was that he enjoyed reading my work; I was relieved. But he had a few questions, a few of the most challenging and insightful questions that only he could put together. Once I got past Dr. Al, I knew I would be OK. Not to say that Dan, or Magali, or Linda were not going to destroy me. But I knew he was the best and everything would be fine.

We had numerous contacts since 2003. He was one of my references (and what a great reference letter he wrote). I had heard from a friend that Dr. Al had cancer but was doing well. I knew he was serving as interim dean and was saddened that he had been eliminated from consideration for the permanent position. I told my wife Angel I was going to send him an e-mail asking how he was doing. (When I raised money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society in 2006 to run the Dublin marathon, Dr. Al was one of the first pledges.) I never sent the e-mail. I wish I had.

Dr. Al may be gone, but his spirit lives on in many ways. Not just in his wife Regina, but in his two children, his grandchildren, and in thousands of students and scholars across the world. When I put on a suit and tie, when I read the text for the umpteenth time, when I spend my Saturday afternoons grading papers, the spirit of Dr. Al lives on in me, as a student and teacher of literature.

James Jaap, Ph.D. 2003

My memories of Dr. Labriola reach back to 1990, the year I took the first of three Shakespeare classes from him. Perhaps the truly emblematic moment came on the final day of class in Shakespeare II: Histories and Tragedies, since, without prior agreement among the students in the course, we gave to Labriola a round of applause once he entered the room. In the more than 60 classes I have taken at Duquesne, this show of respect and affection stands alone, unique yet entirely appropriate. This episode represents for me, in miniature, the influence he had on thousands of students and colleagues, and his spirit will be carried forward in the minds and hearts of those whom he edified and inspired.

Timothy Ruppert, Ph.D. 2008
Greg Barnhisel is on sabbatical during the spring 2009 semester. Effective for the fall 2009 semester, he has been granted tenure and promoted to associate professor.

Laura Callanan has been granted tenure and promoted to associate professor beginning in fall 2009.

Laura Engel is the 2008–2009 director of undergraduate studies in the Department and recently had a book of essays published, titled The Public’s Open to Us All: Essays on Women and Performance in 18th Century England (Cambridge University Press, 2009). The book includes essays from several women writers, including Susan Howard, Rita Allison Kondrath, and Danielle Gissinger.

John Fried presented a paper at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference in Chicago called “A Different Conversation: Teaching Creative Writing One-on-One.”


Susan Howard is the director of graduate studies in the Department and recently presented a paper titled “Families by Design: Surrogacy in Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park: Film and Text” at the CEA conference in Pittsburgh, March 2009.

Linda Kinnahan had an article published in Journal of Contemporary Women’s Writing titled “Kathleen Fraser and a Poetics of the Visual” (Spring 2009) and presented “Surrealism and the Broken Body in Mina Loy’s War Poems” at the Modernist Studies Association Conference, November 2008, Nashville, Tenn.

Magali Cornier Michael, current chair of the English Department, presented “Imagining the Other/Terrorist as Human: McEwan’s Gesturing toward the Ethical in Saturday” at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, February 2009.

James Purdy, director of the Writing Center, presented at three conferences in 2008. At the Conference on College Composition and Communication, held in March in San Francisco, he presented a paper titled “Aren’t Media Already Multiple: Reflections on Proposing a Course in Multimodal Composition.” At the Pittsburgh Area Writing Center Mini-Conference, held at the University of Pittsburgh in November, he presented “Writing in Common: The Challenges and Opportunities of Our Writing Center’s Uncommon Staff and Students.” And at the Thomas R. Watson Conference on Rhetoric and Composition, held at the University of Louisville in October, he presented “The Changing Space of Research: Web 2.0 and the Integration of Research and Writing Environments.”

Timothy Ruppert, one of the Department’s visiting professors, presented a paper at the 40th Annual NeMLA conference in Boston, February 2009. The paper was titled “Sparking Positive Change: William Wordsworth’s Alice Fell as a Visionary Text.” His article “Time and the Sibyl in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man” was accepted for publication in Studies in the Novel and is scheduled to appear this summer.

Timothy Vincent presented “From Sympathy to Empathy: Robert Vischer and Early Modernism” at the Northeast Modern Language Association conference at Boston University, February 2009 and “Empathetic Expressionism in Modernist Art and Literature” at the American Comparative Literature Association conference at Harvard, March 2009.