Statement of tribute for Robert Clark Whitton

November 17, 2011

Robert Whitton was born on February 12, 1944 in Charlotte, North Carolina. Raised in Charlotte, he was a 1962 graduate of Myers Park High School and graduated from Davidson College in 1966. He went on for a Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania completing his dissertation, Absolutely Isolated Triple Points of Complex Algebraic Surfaces in 1972 (Amy claims to have a copy if anyone is interested…). Since then, he founded 3 different computer hardware or software companies and was visiting lecturer at UNCC as well as a perennial visiting assistant and associate professor here at Davidson College. He first taught for us in 1979 (also the year he married Amy), intermittently for the next 15 years and then every year since 1995. In 2008 the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee presented an "MVP" award (for Most Valuable Professor) to Rob. He received the 2010 SGA Faculty Award for his tireless commitment and dedication to the lives of Davidson students.

Our dear friend, mentor, and colleague passed away on November 11, 2011. That’s 11/11/11. As so many of his students have said over the past week, Dr. Robert Whitton loved teachable moments. So, 11/11/11 or 111,111 or 1 1 1 1 1 1. That’s 63 in binary, 4 less than how old he was. Did you know that this seemingly bland number, 111,111 when multiplied by itself is 12,345,654,321 or 12345654321 – a palindromic number. 111,111 isn’t a prime number, but instead is the product of primes, 3 x 7 x 11 x 13 x 37. Okay, probably more than you wanted to hear about numbers. But as we all know, Rob was curious and wanted to discuss everything, not just mathematics.

He loved so many things and so many people. There are thousands of stories – it seems he may actually have been cloned – he was deeply involved with countless people and present at so many events. And, evidently he ate all the time! He had so many lunch buddies, breakfast partners, and chicken dinners. Lots of us know him not from meals but from early morning workouts at the union gym. How could that exercise guy be the eating guy? To others he was always at a musical or theatrical happening – the jazz quartet, the symphony, a play, the ballet, the list goes on. He introduced not just students but also many of his colleagues to the joy of opera. Many knew him as a sports fan – cheering on his students in their contests. He had a 3-Stooges buddy, a look at that tree buddy, a what kind of bug is that buddy, untold numbers of look at how insightful my student is buddies, many you are welcome to stay at my house buddies, stop by and raid candy jar buddies, fishing buddies, drinking buddies, and countless others.

Rob – that’s what I called him, others called him Robert or Roberto or Rowbear - was the one you were always glad to run into on the way somewhere else. No doubt a pleasant
conversation was about to ensue, an interesting fact discovered, or his delight revealed at something he knew had happened in your life. One colleague tells of an encounter in the stairwell and the stair climbing technique he learned in grad school: "Evidently, the math department at Penn is on the fourth floor, and the entrance he and his friends used was on the 0th floor, so they had 4 full floors to climb each time they went in. And being mathematicians, they quickly determined that whoever was on the outside of a pair going upstairs together was at a distinct disadvantage, having to travel additional distance (the extent of which they undoubtedly calculated). And then they found a clever solution. On each landing, the outside person would cut straight to the inside of the next flight, while the inside person went to the outside of that flight. By switching places every flight, each person went the same distance overall. My colleague continues, Rob and I did this maneuver together a few times, and I'll never forget the fun he had teaching it to me. He took such great pride in it, not just for its increased efficiency, but for the sense of fairness and equality it represented. I will never climb stairs with another person when I won't think of Rob and his optimal stair-climbing algorithm. "

He would often pop into one of our offices. With me he’d occasionally ask “how’re you doing boss?” I thought I was too busy for more than a fine, thanks - but he’d ask a specific question and thankfully we’d end up talking a bit. He loved to share what he was thinking about mathematically or what he was doing to help his students understand class material. He would show off some wood he had cut to help explain volume under a surface to his multivariable calculus students, or something a student had made to help explain hyperbolic space, or something neat the TI – 89 was doing – often an error it had made, confirming that indeed the human brain is still superior to the calculator. He did this with everyone. A colleague writes: Many times, he stopped in and wrote some math on my white board, saying, "now, watch this" and after writing out the clever turn of equations, or whatever it was, would turn with delight all over his face and say "Is that cool, or what?" His students must have seen this look every day. What a gift.

Another recalls - he'd say, "You’ve got to see this!" Then, he'd show me a student’s work. He'd often guide me saying, "Pay no attention to these parts. They were actually wrong. Here, look here! See it? Amazing! That student came up with that idea in a test in a 50 minute class. Our students, they simply amaze me!" There were times when such an approach would even leave a student stuck on a problem. I don’t see how it could be solved that way but what amazing intuition!"

These are not isolated stories. We’ve heard from so many students about the help, care and love they received from him. It’s clear why they feel that way. As we’ve started to substitute in the three courses he was teaching, we’ve read over his course notes and summaries of what he thought he would cover in class, and no wonder the students felt he was right in there with them and wanted them to understand. Here are a couple of examples.
• Monday - Limits for adults. The whole point here is to see a rigorous mathematical definition of a simple idea. I have done my job if you see that the technical talk about the limit matches our intuitive idea of the limit. Give it some effort, let me help.
• Wednesday - If something is changing there are two sensible questions 1) How fast & 2) How much?
• Wednesday - Can an infinite number of (positive) numbers add up to a finite quantity? Zeno of Elea (465 BC +/-) thought not, Pythagoras thought not, how about you?

Even though Rob was “only a visitor” and officially just had teaching duties, he did much more. He was an active member of our department, helping with our recent curriculum overhaul; he had advisees – both first year and majors, he took his turn running the math help center, and he participated in the department’s outreach, most notably with the Carolina Panther’s Number Crunch competition.

As much as Rob loved his community, teaching his students, and life in general, he loved his family most - his beautiful wife Amy, his daughters Allison, Sarah, Katherine, and Amanda, his son Michael, his grandchildren and his entire extended family. His pride in them and who they were was palpable and beautiful to see. And he often helped us remember to treasure our own families. On more than one occasion, even if running late to class he’d ask about our children or grandchildren. One memory of a colleague is that when Rob saw his children, he’d stop and smile and reflect and seemingly capture the moment in his mind's eye. Then, he'd say, "I love this! I'm so happy I saw them today."

He would do anything to help out the department and was willing to teach what and when we needed. He was not however willing to do it for $1. Somehow he had to pay for all those meals. So, while he may not have given his entire salary back to the college, he gave that and more often simply in his presence. Did we take Rob for granted – I think yes. He made it so easy to do. But, I think he knew that we appreciated all he did for us and that we really counted on him. He lived life to the fullest and celebrated the life of his friends and family more than his own. Reynolds Price once spoke at Convocation here at Davidson College and offered the following - I only regret my economies. It’s easy to believe that Rob was the rare kind of person who died without such regrets.

We will all miss his wit, his twinkling eyes, his smile, and the deep care Rob had for each and every person in his life.

There is so much more that could be said. Perhaps I should have taken advice of a colleague who mentioned that I could offer the following and then take a seat: In response to a reminder that his faculty activity report was late, Rob responded "All I did was teach."