

# Professor Murphy leaves a lasting impression

By Ted Nesi '07

When I first met Professor of Political Science Jerry Murphy, during my junior year at Wheaton, I found him to be so enthusiastic about my first project for him that I wondered whether he might be putting me on. How, I wondered, could this 60-something-year-old man with a doctorate and a long, distinguished career possibly be so keen on my two-page essay about the federal gasoline tax?

Part of the reason, I later learned, was that Professor Murphy was a generalist in an age of specialists, a man who felt equally comfortable discussing Chinese-American relations or an obscure Danish dramatist. He was a true intellectual. The other reason, though, was that Jerry Murphy was *always* enthusiastic about everything he did.

Like so many others in the Wheaton community, then, I was stunned late last fall when I found out that my professor, mentor and friend had died suddenly of a heart attack on December 4. The news was all the more shocking because, despite his 70 years, Professor Murphy had always seemed to have more energy than students a half century his junior.

At the time I met him, Professor Murphy was the director of public affairs at Wheaton, where he worked in different capacities for 41 years. Before that, he had been a Loeb Fellow in the Harvard University Design School, vice president of government affairs at Siemens Corporation in Washington, D.C., as well as executive director of the Business-Higher Education Forum. He was, to say the least, well-rounded.

Word of his death spread quickly—I found out after getting a text message on my way to work—and it was met with an outpouring of grief. The day after his death, I drove back to campus, where the Office of Service, Spirituality and Social Responsibility had organized an informal gathering in the basement of Cole Memorial Chapel.

Sitting there in the candlelit room, students, faculty, staff members and alums told stories about Jerry—and though many of them were new to me, in a sense they were all the same story, about a man who exemplified what Wheaton faculty members strive to do for all their students: educate, inspire and empower them.

It is not uncommon for Wheaton alums—even those who graduated many years ago—to talk about the professors who made a difference in their lives.

Professor Murphy was one of those people. For more than seven decades, and particularly during his many years as a teacher, he made a deep and lasting impact on hundreds, if not thousands, of people.

For Professor Murphy that was not nearly as hard to do as it might sound, because the interest he took in the world around him—and, particularly, the people in it—was the most absorbing and sincere of anyone I've ever met.

Professor Murphy always had the utmost faith in the capabilities and possibilities of each of his students, usually much more than we ourselves did. And his enthusiasm was not limited to the all-stars, either—the Rhodes Scholars and SGA presidents among us. He gave just as much time and energy to people whom others never singled out. We all learned a great deal about living from him.

We learned other lessons, too. As a writer, one of the many things he taught me was never to use the word “must.” “The only things you ‘must’ do,” he told me, “are breathe and eat”—as opposed to, say, negotiate with Iran. He advised me to use “should,” and I do.

That practicality was also why Professor Murphy succeeded in the corporate world, a distant and oft-maligned place to 20-year-olds, and one that his experiences helped to demystify. That experience made him an important role model, showing us we would not have to sell out to succeed in business so long as we held firmly to our values.

Unfailingly polite and witty (even with a joke you'd heard once or twice before), he put the gentle in gentleman. With his combination of civics and civility, I always associated Murphy with the spirit of President Kennedy and the New Frontier of the early 1960s.

More than anything else, though, I cherished Professor Murphy for his optimism. To him, realism never meant defeatism or, heaven forbid, cynicism. In that sense, he himself was a daily lesson to his students, who grew up in a world soaked in irony and distrust.

Jerry understood something essential about life—that we have the power to make it rich and worthwhile, and to help make it that way for other people, too.

That is not something we must do, of course. But he showed us why we should. [Q](#)

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