A Man Of Character

Colleagues Recall JMU Prof's Optimism, Curiosity, Wit

By EMILY SHARRER
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HARRISONBURG — For Debra Warne, a mundane day at the office could always be turned around quickly by a visit from Roddy Amenta.

Amenta, a professor of geology at James Madison University for 38 years, was well known at the college, in part because of his famous strolls through the science and math wings.

"No matter where you were, Roddy might be walking down your hallway," said Warne, a mathematics professor who counted Amenta as one of her first friends at JMU after he sauntered through her department.

"Roddy walked into the room and everybody was smiling. He had a way of just connecting with everybody on a personal level, which is difficult to do at a big university like JMU."

His optimism, curiosity, wit and dry sense of humor are what friends and family say they will remember most about Amenta, who died at Rockingham Memorial Hospital Saturday. Amenta, who friends say showed no signs of illness, was battling myelodysplastic syndrome, a blood disease that affects the bone marrow. He was 75.

"As we're all talking about Roddy, the common denominator is people commenting not so much on his accomplishments, which are great, but ... his character," said Kristen St. John, professor of geology at JMU.

A Sept. 14 celebration of life service is planned in the Montpelier

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Professor Kept People On Their Toes With Humor

Room at JMU’s East Campus Dining Hall. A time has yet to be determined.

Though Amenta, who came to JMU as an assistant professor of geology in 1974, dedicated his career to geology, friends and family say his research interests were widespread.

“He was really thinking in very interdisciplinary terms all the time,” said St. John. “He’d publish something in a computer science journal and then something in a mineralogy journal.”

At JMU — where he always sat in on classes and sometimes enrolled in them — and in many aspects of his personal life, Amenta was a lifelong student.

“He retired last September just before fall semester and the first thing he did was turn around and take a biochemistry class,” said Bob Atkins, professor emeritus of chemistry and one of Amenta’s closest friends.

Brian Utter, associate professor of physics, recalls the way Amenta approached projects.

“[We were] building this contraption where Roddy almost struck me as being kind of like a student again,” he said. “He was just having fun playing with it and he really threw himself into it.”

Amenta’s hobbies included refinishing antiques and building furniture — especially fiddling with an 18th century clock at his home — and learning about history.

An avid classical music fan, Amenta was rarely known to miss the local Bach Festival, a celebration of his favorite composer.

Amenta had a unique way of doing things — like watching three differently slanted news channels to “figure out what the real story was,” said his wife of 43 years, Donna Amenta. Or the practice of giving almost everyone he encountered a nickname.

“They just rolled out and they were all perfect,” David Brakke, dean of the college of science and mathematics, said with a laugh. “In a lot of cases, Donna only knew the students by their nickname because that’s how he would talk about them.”

Often, Amenta kept people on their toes with his humor. Atkins recalls hearing about how in class, Amenta would casually refer to the periodic table of the elements as the periodic charge of the elephants — just to be sure students were paying attention.

“That was his kind of humor,” Atkins said. “You really had to pay attention because he wasn’t a big gregarious guy.”

Students serious about learning were never short on challenges or opportunities in his classes, colleagues say.

“He had quite a high standard,” St. John said. “He wasn’t going to lower his bar, he was going to do what he could to help [students] raise their bar.”

She recalls Amenta creating a special bulletin board for a publication that he let several students co-author with him.

“Once [the report] came out in the journal he hung it on the bulletin board...[and] he highlighted with a highlighter all the student names. It was all about the students,” she said. “We all try to involve students in our research, but he took it the whole way.”

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