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Life Remembered: Popular classics prof was 'legendary'

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Friends and colleagues remembered Richard Thomas Scanlan as an enthusiastic and outstanding teacher who brought the world of Latin and classical mythology to life for a generation of University of Illinois students.

Mr. Scanlan, 81, of Champaign, died at 1:14 a.m. Sunday at Carle Foundation Hospital in Urbana.

Funeral arrangements were incomplete at Morgan Memorial Home, 1304 Regency Drive West, Savoy.

"He was a legendary teacher," said David Sansone, head of the Classics Department at the UI. "For years and years, undergraduates at the UI felt they had to take his course.

"The UI experience wasn't complete without taking Scanlan's course. There were students who enjoyed the class so much that they convinced their sons, daughters and even grandchildren to take his course."

According to Sansone, Mr. Scanlan had to teach his class at Foellinger because it was the only venue large enough to handle 1,200 students at a time.

"Even at 1,200 students, each year we would get requests from students wanting to get in his class even though the class was closed," Sansone said.

As a professor of the classics, Mr. Scanlan was known for disappearing from the lecture platform in the middle of class, only to return a few minutes later dressed as a toga-clad priest of Apollo, the Greek god of prophecy.

"He had Apollo predicting UI football or basketball games, depending upon the season," recalled Professor Emeritus James Dengage.

After the students enthusiastically chanted the "I-L-L, I-N-I" cheer, Mr. Scanlan would appear deep in thought and then turn to the class.

"Now I can see it clearly," he said. "Minnesota 14 ... Illinois 31."

At other times, Mr. Scanlan would emerge as Jason of the Golden Fleece, the shrewd Odysseus or even the mighty Hercules. His character would then be interviewed for the students by a teaching assistant.

In 1979, he convinced 12 female UI students to come to his Roman civilization class dressed in white to perform the dance of the vestal virgins.

Mr. Scanlan's enthusiasm for the Illini was rewarded in 1981 when he was crowned as "King Dad" during the UI's Dads Day celebration.

News-Gazette staff writer Paul Wood, who took several of Mr. Scanlan's classes, described him as "a great guy."

"He was very entertaining, and I learned a lot, too," Wood said. "He taught a civilization class that was the most popular course on campus at the time. More people know more about the classics from him than from anybody else."

University of Illinois spokeswoman Robin Kaler recalled sneaking in on Mr. Scanlan's classes from time to time.

"I was registered for a different class, but sometimes I would skip my class to go to his class instead," Kaler said. "He truly was that good."

For many years, Mr. Scanlan was in charge of the Illinois State Latin Contest.

"He wrote a comic strip featuring a superhero called Superlegatus who acted and thought in Latin," Wood said. "He was widely known for making learning fun."

When Superlegatus wasn't leaping over mountains in a single bound, the Latin-speaking hero kept himself busy saving his girlfriend from monsters.

Wood said Mr. Scanlan also pioneered the use of computers as a tool for teaching the Latin language.

Mr. Scanlan was also dedicated to his church, serving as a permanent deacon at St. Matthew Catholic Church in Champaign.

"He was very well-beloved by the people of the parish," said St. Matthew pastor Monsignor Mark J. Merdian. "He applied the same demeanor and attitude in his preaching that was so popular as a teacher. Most of all, he was very kind and caring to everybody."

Merdian described Mr. Scanlan as a great listener.

"When he preached, he had a way of telling great historical stories from the Bible and helping people to connect those lessons to their everyday life. Nobody was better than him in bringing the letters of St. Paul to life."

In 2005, he received the Pere Marquette Award for outstanding service to his parish.

At St. Matthew, he taught adult education classes on the Old and New Testaments, the Passion narratives, the life and work of St. Paul and the Catechism of the Catholic Church. He was involved in Cursillo for more than 20 years, frequently visited hospitals and served as a former president of the parish council.