

A Panel in Honor of James Sherman Ruebel (1945-2016)

Michele Valerie Ronnick (Wayne State University), organizer and presider

1. Biography of James S. Ruebel, CAMWS President (2001-2002). **Ward W. Briggs, Jr.** (University of South Carolina)
2. Two Unlikely Roommates: Narcissus and Sisyphus. **Theodore Tarkow** (University of Missouri-Columbia)
3. Ruebel (and Others) Join the Corps. **Scott Aran Lepisto** (Hillsdale College)
4. Caesar, the Geographoi, and Lewis and Clark: The Use of Animals in Describing New Lands. **Kenneth F. Kitchell, Jr.** (University of Massachusetts-Amherst)
5. Apuleius in the Work of African American Novelist, Charles W. Chesnutt (1858-1932). **Michele Valerie Ronnick** (Wayne State University)

James Sherman Ruebel

1945-2016

Remarks made by
CAMWS historian Ward Briggs (University of South Carolina)

“I wouldn’t be the person I am today without him.”

“He changed my life; I am not only a better reader and writer, but a better thinker and a stronger person.”

“He instilled the value of learning for the sake of learning, even if that isn’t in the confines of the traditional classroom setting.”

“I don’t think I ever met a student that didn’t love Dr. Ruebel.”

These comments from graduates and colleagues of Jim Ruebel’s Honors Program are what any of us in this room, in this field, in this profession would be honored to have said of us. We spend our careers trying to ignite the spark in each of our students to appreciate grammar, style, and eternal literary

genius because if our spark lives in them, that is immortality. Jim Ruebel's first and greatest devotion as a classicist was to his students and they handsomely rewarded his care and sympathy and above all his gentle sense of humor with words of equal devotion.

James Sherman Ruebel was born in Cincinnati on August 18, 1945 to Sherman A., a road contractor, & Helen H. Werner Ruebel. He attended Finneytown High School in Cincinnati and received his A.B. from Yale in 1967. He returned to his home town and received his M.A. and in 1972 his Ph.D. from the University of Cincinnati in Classics and Ancient History with a dissertation entitled "The Political Development of Cato Censorius: The Man and the Image." His first academic appointment was as assistant professor of classics at the University of Minnesota, where he published an incisive article in *Historia* indicating that Atticus told Cicero of the meeting in Lucca on 25 April 56 BCE. In 1975 he wrote in *Classical World* of the false assumption of hostility between Cato and Scipio Africanus from the time they met in 204. Jim showed that their relationship was neutral until their confrontation in 187 and 184. In 1977 he wrote in LCM a note on Nepos's Life of Cato, showing that Cato was sent as quaestor to Sardinia by Scipio between 204 and 202 B.C. to oversee the Roman troops from Africa.

In 1978 he went to Iowa State, in Ames, where he published in *TAPA* a lengthy and detailed chronology of the trial of Milo from January to May 52 BCE, based on Asconius's summary of Cicero's *Pro Milone*. Jim shouldered the

burden of administration as he rose from associate professor to full professor of classics in 1994 with the publication his book *Caesar and the Crisis of the Roman Aristocracy*, the capstone of his long interest in Roman Republican history. Jim taught a wide variety of courses and maintained his full courseload despite his considerable service responsibilities as executive officer of the department, chair of the Classical Studies program, and, characteristically, chair of the University Athletic Board.

I say “characteristically” because at every stop in his academic career, Jim was likely the most fervent and voluble supporter of the university’s entire athletic program, all sports, male and female, major and minor. Both at Iowa State and at Ball State, he was the University’s Faculty Representative for Intercollegiate athletics and the Faculty Athletic representative to the Mid-America Conference and the NCAA. Both in Ames and Muncie, he would sit front row half court at sparsely attended women’s basketball games, a voluble fan happy to cheer his team and ready to express with equal fervor his objections *fortissimo* to what he perceived as a bad call.

As to his teaching in Ames all that need be said is that while there he was awarded the APA Award for Excellence in the Teaching of Classics.

In 2000 he published his translation of *Apuleius the Metamorphoses Book I*.

Gifted teacher, skilled administrator, serious scholar, Jim’s true calling lay elsewhere. On the strength of his teaching award and his Apuleius, he acquired new prominence in the classical world. In those days there was

almost a pipeline from Iowa State to Ball State. So many faculty at Muncie had come from Iowa State that when Jim arrived in Muncie in 2000 there was a party called “Welcome to East Ames.”

Jim came to Ball State as Professor of Classical Studies, Dean of the Honors College, and Director of the Whitinger Scholars Program, the program that selected students for the Honors College. Among his first project was the renovation of the Edmund F. and Virginia B. Ball residence to give the Honors College a new and historic home. His achievements were rewarded in 2014 when he was elected president of the National Collegiate Honors Council Board.

Here he found his heart’s desire. His colleague Don Caristi wrote that Jim “cared for students above everything. He made a point of knowing each of the Honors Students. He loved talking to them. He loved interviewing students for the prestigious Whitinger Scholarship, and calling successful students himself to deliver the good news.

His student Leah Heim wrote, “The integrated Honors Class became the only place where I felt real. My mind charged toward the edge of the world, lured forward by all the sweetest voices—Homer, Virgil, Dante, Aeschylus, and Shakespeare to name a few.” “The Honors College that Dr. Ruebel created is about leading scared and lonely college freshmen through a tour of reality, showing the dazzling possibilities outside of their experiences giving them dreams beyond the confines of their lives.”

His approach may be summarized by a regular action he would take early in his seminar. He would walk out of the circle of student desks to the

blackboard and write the word “*Oikos*” on the board. He explained that it meant one’s family, the family’s property, and their house in the ancient Greek world, but clearly it was a code for the Honors College, which he viewed as a family residing in their own house in possession of and in pursuit of knowledge—an *oikos*. As Jim put it in his presidential address, “You cannot be yourself by yourself. We do and must define ourselves in relation to others.” In other words, to paraphrase a first lady, “It takes an *Oikos*.”

He wanted to know the students as family members, he wanted to assure them that their needs would be met but unlike the patriarch of most families, he made no judgements. As one student said, “He taught us *how* to think, not what to think.” A conservative student objected to a movie that Jim was going to show in class, a class she felt she could not in good conscience attend. Jim called her to his office not to talk but to listen, then allowed her to make up the classwork when she missed the movie. She said later, “He taught me—and so many other students and people over the course of his tenure as teacher, professor, and leader—to consider, and to be considerate.”

Jim also believed that real learning took place as much outside the classroom as in. “He instilled the value of learning for the sake of learning, even if that isn’t in the confines of the traditional classroom setting.” Thus he took his classes out of the classroom to Rome and Florence itself during his Honors Colloquium class and guided them with an energy that even in his late sixties outstripped the energy of his eighteen-to twenty year old students. His student Tim Berg wrote, “What students saw during tours in Italy was “someone

passionate about ideas, passionate about history, passionate about classics....one of his great wishes for them was that *they* find a passion for something as great as *his* passions for Rome and teaching students.”

Seeing the ancient sites often inculcated the habit of visiting historic sites. His student Chris Flook wrote, “The trip itself stimulated a lifelong interest in traveling abroad, particularly to places that are built upon a deep history.”

He also fostered learning outside of classroom by inviting them into his home for his “Read a Book” Book club. As a colleague put it: “I don’t think I ever met a student that didn’t love Dr. Ruebel. He was an integral part of creating a congenial educational mood, an environment where good questions are the answers we are looking for, where the humanities, arts and sciences come together in a vigorous blend of inquiry and investigation.”

Dubbed “The Dumbledore of the BSU Honors College,” Jim could draw admiration from students even if it occasionally ventured off into hyperbole. Said student Katie Bostdorff class of 2009 “I’m sure the average IQ of Earth dropped at least a few points when he died.”

Most of us in this room will recall the same gentle, generous, and humorous comrade who graced our meetings. His service to CAMWS was great. From 1984 to 2013 he either presented a paper or presided over a session 24 times. He served on too many committees to list here and was elected president for 2000-2001. Following that arduous year, he chaired the Development Committee from 2004 to 2007 and the Merit Committee from 2009 to 2012.

After Jim died on October 9, 2016, a student recalled a line from the musical *Hamilton*: “It’s planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.” She continues, “I think in this instance that we, his students, are the seeds that he has planted. We are planted in the garden of the Ball State University Honors College. Dr. Ruebel won’t read our theses or attend our graduation, but he will be with all of us as we grow as academics and as human beings.”

Said another: He didn’t just introduce us to Achilles and Aeneas—he didn’t just introduce us to Beowulf and *Candide*—Dr. Ruebel introduced us to ourselves. I ask you, What greater purpose can we serve?