



Dr. John F. O'Donnell

March 30, 2026

Dr. John F. O'Donnell (a.k.a. Jack to those who knew him best), distinguished educator, mentor, and advocate for excellence in English education, passed away on March 30, 2026 after a fierce three and a half year long battle following a massive stroke. The fiery redhead was born in West Philadelphia on August 23rd, 1937 the son of John G. and Annie O'Donnell. He was precocious in his youth, winning academic awards at St. Thomas More High School while delivering papers, selling programs outside Shibe Park, and caddying. He put himself through Villanova where he graduated Summa Cum Laude. This earned him a full scholarship at Harvard where he received his master's degree. He later earned his doctoral degree from Temple University.

Dr. O'Donnell dedicated his life to teaching, scholarship, and the advancement of language arts education. He began his career as a teacher at the Harvard School in California and Culver Military Academy in Indiana, later serving as a faculty member at Penn State University's King of Prussia campus. He also taught in the Upper Merion Area School District before joining Millersville University in 1969. Over the course of a remarkable 27-year tenure at Millersville, he taught both undergraduate and graduate courses and served as chair of the English Department for a decade. In recognition of his exemplary service, he was granted the honorary title of Professor of English Emeritus upon his retirement in June 1996.

A respected leader in his field, Dr. O'Donnell was deeply committed to the professional growth of both students and educators. He advised and inspired hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students and mentored countless future teachers. He served as a language arts coordinator in the Upper Merion School District and as a consultant and in-service education speaker for over 150 school districts.

For more than twenty years, Dr. O'Donnell was a consultant to the Advanced Placement Program of the College Board and the Educational Testing Service, helping to shape rigorous academic standards across multiple states. He also contributed his expertise to numerous organizations, including the Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the Conference on English Education. His work extended to state and national committees focused on reading assessment, middle grades education, and honors programming.

Dr. O'Donnell was an active member of the Lancaster-Lebanon Writing Council, serving on its Executive Committee, and contributed to the Pennsylvania Communication and Reading Plan as both a consultant and workshop leader. He frequently led workshops and delivered presentations on curriculum development, process writing, and the integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

Beyond higher education, Dr. O'Donnell was a dedicated public servant. He served four years on the Hempfield School Board, chairing three major committees, and participated in the district's Middle School Steering Committee. He also served on the boards of St. Leo's and The New School of Lancaster. An enthusiastic patron of local theater, he supported the arts serving on the Arts Advisory Council at the Ware Center for the Arts, and as a board member of the First Stage Theater of Lancaster. John encouraged young writers through his eleven years as final judge for the Newspaper-in-

Education Week Contest.

Always curious, learning, and holding court, John was a voracious reader, engaging storyteller, and eloquent bard. He was editor and sounding board for his playwright wife Cande's scripts. He loved golf and was proud to have shot a hole in one at Cape May National and of shooting his age more than once. John traveled extensively. He, Cande, his kids, and grandkids spent their summers at his happy place, their Cape May home with a view of the ocean and Wildwoods, where he spent his summers working two jobs to put himself through school. His Mother was an Irish immigrant, and John was proud of his Irish heritage. He took his entire family to the Auld Sod and made many return trips to the family farm with his cousins, enhancing his delightful Irish wit sprinkled with a bit of blarney.

John married his beloved wife, Candace, December 30th, 1967, in the Chapel at Villanova University, and together they built a family grounded in education, service, and community. He is survived by his wife, Candace; his sister Annie O'Donnell, his children, Meghan McLane (Chris), Katie Forrester (Bob), Sean O'Donnell (Theresa), and Brendan O'Donnell (Jess); and his cherished grandchildren, Gavin O'Donnell, Keeghan McLane, Tres Forrester, Lachlan McLane, Kenavan O'Donnell, Finneghan Forrester, Maeve O'Donnell, and Fionnuala O'Donnell.

Dr. O'Donnell will be remembered for his unwavering commitment to education, his intellectual leadership, and his profound impact on students, colleagues, and the broader academic community.

Now Himself gets to rest in peace looking out on the wild ocean, deep in thought having just finished a Yeats poem, or perhaps rewatching the Eagles execute a perfect Brotherly Shove, or Villanova's Perfect Game as he raises a

glass of Tullamore Dew and offers Sláinte and a Go Birds to all that he loved during this life.

A Celebration of Life will be held at St. Mary's Catholic Church, 119 South Prince Street Lancaster, PA on Saturday, April 18, 2026 at 10:00 a.m. with a reception to follow.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests all memorial contributions be made to Ronald McDonald House, https://give.ronaldmcdonaldhouse.org/fundraiser/7140206?is_new=true

Previous Events

Celebration of Life

APR 18. 10:00 AM (ET)

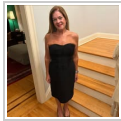
Historic St. Mary's Catholic Church
119 South Prince Street
Lancaster, PA

Tribute Wall

EC

“ As a high school student at Upper Merion High School, I had the biggest crush on Mr. O'Donnell. I was in his Advanced Placement and Creative writing classes. I can still see his thick mop of red hair blowing in the wind as he drove off school grounds in his charcoal gray Jaguar XKE convertible. A really cool guy and a great teacher. He came to Millersville the year I graduated.

Elaine Creel - April 26 at 08:56 PM



That's adorable! Thanks for sharing! Katie (daughter)

Katie O'Donnell Forrester - May 19 at 06:04 PM

BR

“ Jack was a lifelong inspiration and a remarkable person in every respect. I giant among us

Bill Ricci - April 17 at 10:29 PM

RS

“ Robert and Marsha Schmitter planted a [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) in honor of Dr. John F. O'Donnell.

Robert and Marsha Schmitter - April 14 at 08:05 AM

RS

“ Robert and Marsha Schmitter purchased the Full Of Love Bouquet for the family of Dr. John F. O'Donnell.



Robert and Marsha Schmitter - April 14 at 08:05 AM



“ Beautiful Heart Bouquet was purchased for the family of Dr. John F. O'Donnell.



April 10 at 04:58 PM



“ John....A very dear neighbor for 17 years in Landisville....always smiling and kind to all of us.

nancy morrell - April 07 at 10:33 AM



“ Thank you from the bottom of our hearts for all you contributed to the world in scholarship, Dr. O'Donnell. Rest in peace with our Lord.

Ezetta Walter

Ezetta Walter - April 06 at 11:42 AM



“ One of the best days of my life, meeting cousins Jack and Cande and all the others I'm sure many of you will recognize (2021). Love and prayers to all the family.



Patricia Petrous - April 04 at 10:22 AM

PR

“ Jack was always so kind to me. Genuinely interested in what I was doing. And he always had sage advice! I will miss him.

Pete Ricci - April 03 at 09:20 PM

BR

“ I wish the entire family much peace during this difficult time. There are few things harder than losing a parent. Sending a lot of love. ---
Bryan

Bryan - April 03 at 03:20 PM