



Robert W. Russell

April 4, 2011

Robert W. Russell was born on December 30, 1924 in Binghamton, New York to James Russell and May Clarke. He died on April 1, 2011 at the Hospice of Lancaster County facility in Mount Joy, PA after a lengthy battle with cancer. He was “Bob” to his adult friends and professional colleagues, “Rob” to his family.

He graduated in 1940 from the New York Institute for the Blind at age 16. At the Institute he competed on the high school wrestling team, which is where he began his lifelong love of the sport. His contribution to the sport was recognized by his induction into the Pennsylvania, and then subsequently to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame where he was awarded the Medal of Courage in 2000.

He attended Hamilton College for two years, and later transferred to Yale, where he completed his B.A. in 1944. During those two years he competed for Yale on the varsity wrestling squad. Yale awarded him an M.A. in English in 1945.

Two successive Rotarian Scholarships supported him as he began his work toward a B. Litt degree at Oxford University. He received the degree in 1951. It was at Oxford University where he met Elisabeth D. Shaw, who was also completing a graduate degree.

Robert W. Russell married Elisabeth D. Shaw at St. Peter's in the East on March 24, 1951 in Oxford, England. The couple subsequently moved to Binghamton, NY. In 1952 they went to Mount Carroll, IL where Bob taught at

Shimer College. They lived in Mount Carroll for three years, before leaving for Lancaster, PA in 1955. Bob had accepted a position in the English Department at Franklin & Marshall College, a position from which he retired in 1990.

Bob Russell was appointed Chairman of the English Department at Franklin & Marshall in 1965, a position he held for eight years. He was appointed the Charles A. Dana Professor of English in 1968.

Robert Russell's job as an English professor was to teach his students independent thinking. He was inclined to award high grades for outstanding work, nothing less. Which is why, with few exceptions, his F&M students loved him.

His greatest teaching tool was the question. His greatest teaching ability, an uncanny sense of how, where, and when during any class he could guide his students towards and through a memorable learning experience. He was simply one of the very best in his profession. He had a world-class understanding of the subject matter, a disciplined intellectual approach, and a fondness for students who would challenge both him and themselves.

His time at the Institute taught him to navigate the New York subway system on his own and with friends. His summers he spent charting the banks of Chenango River with his childhood friends Steve and George. They fished, explored, and learned to love the wind on the water.

When he was eleven, Bob accompanied family friends on a fishing trip to the St. Lawrence River. He fell in love with St. Lawrence immediately, and it was a love that endured all his life. He and his wife Elisabeth bought a home on Hay Island off the town of Gananoque, Ontario, and spent their adult summers there with their growing family. They subsequently purchased another property on the same island, and it remained their summer home all of their lives.

It was at this summer property that Bob became an accomplished carpenter, plumber, dock designer, electrician, appliance repairman, and roofer. During one winter he took a two-cycle small engine course so that he could repair the bevy of older outboard motors that powered the family's growing boat fleet.

There wasn't a bolt he didn't own, or straightened nail he couldn't find on his back porch – the crucial one that was necessary to complete his own, or someone else's island repair project.

Like all the Russell brothers and sisters before him, and he was the youngest in the family, he was an accomplished card player. He learned that trade in the saloons of Binghamton, and exercised that card playing muscle in the nickel, dime, quarter poker group which he played in for over 30 years in Lancaster. Bob Russell was also a writer. He published his autobiography *To Catch An Angel* in 1962. It was a New York Times bestseller, and was subsequently translated into thirty-two other languages. He published a novel called *An Act of Loving* in 1967. That was followed by another autobiographical work – *The Island*, which came out in 1973. He followed that with a textbook on the teaching of English literature.

Bob Russell had an accident as a five-year old that damaged one eye badly. Life conspired against him, and he eventually lost the sight in both eyes. And yet, throughout his life he saw more, and in greater detail, than virtually anyone he ever met. The world that did not know him called him a blind man. To the rest, he was simply, "Professor Russell," "Bob," "Rob," or "Dad." His was a life truly well-lived.

He is survived by his second wife Jane Creed Donaldson Russell, as well as his brother James Russell. In addition he is survived by his sons Richard Geoffrey Russell of Lancaster, PA, Mark Robert Russell of Queensbury, NY, James Avery Russell of Pacific Grove, CA, and his daughter Miranda Elisabeth Russell of Lansdowne, Ontario. His surviving grandchildren include James Truesdale Russell, Elisabeth Avery Russell, Emily Clarke Russell, Emma Carson Russell, Grace Paige Russell, and Rex Avery Russell.

Robert was predeceased by his daughter Elisabeth in 1954, and his first wife Elisabeth in 2005. In addition he was predeceased by his brothers Larry, Bud, Jack, and his sisters Mary and Hunnie.

The family plans a Remembrance which is to be held at the Old Main Chapel

at Franklin & Marshall College at 11:00AM on Saturday, April 9, 2011. A reception will follow at the Academy Room of the Franklin and Marshall College Library.

An additional gathering in Bob's honor will be scheduled in the 1000 Islands for local family and friends in the summer of 2011. In lieu of flowers, the family asks that a donation be made in his name to the local hospice organization in the communities in which you live. In Lancaster, memorial donations in Robert's name may be made to Hospice of Lancaster County, 685 Good Drive, P.O. Box 4125, Lancaster, PA or on-line at www.hospiceoflancaster.org.

Tribute Wall



“ *Robert W. Russell*

October 22, 2023 at 11:34 PM



“ *Professor Russel: You were the best professor I ever had! Thank you for playing such a meaningful role in my education. Tony Spleen '86*

Tony Spleen - January 06, 2016 at 12:00 AM



“ *I was so sad to hear of Professor Russell's passing. He was a tough, compassionate, fascinating, and brilliant teacher who asked the best from his students – the same thing he asked of himself. He was also a talented writer whose books deeply touched the hearts of readers around the world. Since we had to tape record our written assignments so he could easily review them, the most powerful thing I learned from Professor Russell was to pay attention to the sound and the pacing of language, not just its shape and structure. As one who went on to become a professional writer, that has proven to be a powerful lesson indeed. The bright light that is Professor Russell's spirit lives on in all the thousands of students and tens-of-thousands of readers he touched throughout his life. My prayers go out to him and to the loved ones he left behind.*

Peggy Malnati (F&M Class of '82) - April 07, 2011 at 09:18 AM

AO

“ Dear Miranda, James, Mark and Richard,
Your parent's friendship was one of the unexpected treasures we found when we moved to Lancaster in 1980. We have wonderful memories of dinners in their company when conversation would lead to versification and animated contention. Their guidance and recommendations in all things literary exposed us to excellent authors and their works we might otherwise have missed. Your mother's excellent lamb recipe and samples from your father's excellent cellar are some of our favorite gastronomic memories. I loved reading 'To Catch an Angel'. Parts of it remain vividly in my mind decades after I read it for the first time. And I will never forget Bob's rendition of 'Albert and the Lion' at the surprise 60th birthday that Frank organized for me.
Your parents also got to know my parents in Sydney, Australia and they had a happy time visiting them on the island.
We are so very sorry that we are unable to present for Bob's Remembrance on Saturday. Thank you for the elegant and touching published obituary as an additional testimony and tangible record of a life very well lived. Sincerely, Anne and Frank Orban

Anne and Frank Orban - April 07, 2011 at 08:04 AM

KH

“ One of the greatest pleasures and privileges I had while wrestling for F&M from 1981-1985 was knowing Prof. Russell- a front and center fixture in the bleachers at every home match. He would sometimes run the Diplomat competitors down the next day in his sweat suit and sneakers and have us demonstrate the moves from the previous night's match. I grew up in the Lancaster area as a wrestler and a wrestling fan and he was a pillar of the community and environment that made F&M wrestling special. He is immensely loved and revered by the F&M wrestlers and the entire community.

Kevin Heisey - April 07, 2011 at 06:47 AM

GM

“ Prof. Russell passed on April 1st. April Fool’s Day? This great man didn’t die. He’s up there catching angels.
Prof. Russell and I came to F&M the same year – he came as a professor and I came as a lowly freshman. I took every course he offered during my next four years. I had the honor to read aloud to him when he asked. I read to him and cried over his then developing novel *To Catch An Angel*. I am sure I am but one of thousands of students who respected , admired and loved this great teacher.
His was a life well lived.
George C. Mager CM, Ph.D.
Professor (Ret.)
McGill University

George Mager - April 07, 2011 at 01:00 AM

DC

“ Prof Russell was a great teacher who encouraged, improved and sharpened the literary and critical thinking skills of all who entered his classroom or office. Although many of us left Lancaster years ago, his love and joy of reading and writing will continue to influence not only his former students for decades to come ... but everyone that we encourage and influence as well.

David Carney - April 06, 2011 at 04:31 PM

L'

“ Such sad news! I was a student of Prof. Russell's and recorded books for him, too.
He was a wonderful teacher and an amazing person.
My condolences to his family.

Linda Parseghian '77 - April 06, 2011 at 04:16 AM

BV

“ While I had known Bob for many years, it was as a member of his F & M book group, which he formed in retirement and which met every two weeks, that I got to know and appreciate him. Using his well known questioning style and his famous "talking points," he led the group for a decade until, sadly, he became too ill to continue. His legacy remains. We plan to continue the group.

Bela Vassady - April 06, 2011 at 03:51 AM

RS

“ Bob's spirit will live on every summer that my children, and hopefully their children, jump off the dock he built in his first home on Hay Island, ONT; and every time my husband, an F&M English Literature graduate 1989, helps proof any of my writings & sermons. I am honored to have known Bob my whole life (even though he intimidated me when I was small, and perhaps a bit once I was grown, too!) My grandparents Ruth & John Schacht bought his first house on Hay Island, and considered "The Russells" dear friends. I am privileged to continue to reap the benefits of his love of the St. Lawrence, and the story of how he and Elizabeth bought that summer home before they bought a "real" home inspires me to this day to live what is important. I'm also certain he could make these words better - But I offer what I can to a man I'll never forget. Thinking of all the Russell clan, and hopefully I can make the Summer 2011 Memorial on "The" Island. Amy

Rev. Dr. Amy Ruth Schacht - April 05, 2011 at 09:46 PM

EG

“ Prof. Russell was truly the best professor I had at F&M. I will always remember his classes. He would force me to think and really taught! I always remember a discussion about the "ultimate good" after we read *The Story of O*. He was and is an inspiration. My best to his family.

Elizabeth Gordon - April 05, 2011 at 06:35 AM