

Celebrating the life of a teacher's teacher



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IS AN EARLHAM GRADUATE, EDUCATOR, HISTORIAN, AND AUTHOR OF BASEBALL BOOKS INCLUDING "SEPTEMBER SWOON: RICHIE ALLEN, THE '64 PHILLIES AND RACIAL INTEGRATION"; "MIKE SCHMIDT"; "CONNIE MACK'S '29 TRIUMPH"; AND "ONE-ARMED WONDER: PETE GRAY, WARTIME BASEBALL AND THE AMERICAN DREAM"

Author, Earlham grad fondly recalls Peter Cline

When I was a junior at Earlham College in the early 1980s, I was struggling with my future.

One afternoon I meandered into my adviser's office and asked him why he became a history professor. "I suppose it was a lack of imagination and my personal disposition," he replied with a wry smile.

He also admitted that he loved the study of history and so he settled on teaching in order to earn a living. "Since then," he added, "I've made a virtue out of a necessity."

Peter Cline might well have taken a job at Earlham in 1976 out of necessity, but over the 30-some years he taught at the college he made teaching an indisputable virtue.

When I learned of his recent death, I couldn't help but mourn the loss of one of the most beloved individuals I've ever known and, at the same time, celebrate the life of a remarkable educator.

Earlham is unlike any other small college in the country. It's

more of a learning community where professors place a higher priority on teaching than research and publication. The

process of learning is emphasized, rather than the resulting knowledge. Students and teachers are on a first-name basis, and learning takes place on the athletic field, in an art studio, and during a service project as well as in a classroom.

Peter Cline and Earlham complemented each other well. Though he earned his history degrees at major universities he genuinely believed in the power of a liberal arts education to enrich students' lives. He also modeled that belief in his classroom and in his life.

He read widely, thought deeply, and communicated his knowledge with gentle good humor and in a manner that was engaging and respectful of the young minds he taught. His ability to communicate with young people from many different backgrounds was the distinguishing mark of a true scholar.



PETER CLINE
AN INSPIRATION

I was so impressed with him that I took as many of his classes as possible. Classmates and I enjoyed many evenings at his house discussing the most recent historiography.

But Cline's greatest gift was cultivating in me a sense of intellectual self-esteem.

When I graduated from Earlham in December 1981, I was at loose ends. I couldn't find a job back home in Philadelphia and I really didn't know if I wanted to do graduate school. Cline, who understood my dilemma, suggested that I join him as paid program coordinator for Earlham's spring semester in London.

That semester was among the happiest months of my life. It seemed that most evenings we'd talk well into the morning hours about teaching, graduate school, history, or current events. I certainly didn't have the intellectual maturity to be a very thought-provoking conversation partner, but he treated me as a colleague and took my remarks seriously.

He also allowed me to "teach" a Quakerism course and take the students on a trip to northwest England where the religion was founded.

That autumn, I enrolled in graduate history program. It was the beginning of a long process, which eventually resulted in a doctorate, in 1993, and a career in education.

Today, colleges and universities are financially strapped. To save money, they are increasingly turning to adjuncts or less experienced instructors fresh out of graduate school. As a result, they often compromise the academic quality of teaching at their institutions as well as the quality of their students' undergraduate experience.

Peter Cline's example serves as a guiding light for small liberal arts colleges. He knew that good teaching engages the student in life itself, challenging him to question the moral conventions and stereotypes of our society. In the process, he demonstrated that teaching can be a challenging and personally rewarding profession because it demands intellectual rigor and high standards as well as compassion for and faith in young people.

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Palladium-Item

Richmond, Indiana / Saturday, April 12, 2008