

# Headmaster Harrison remembered

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS  
Guest Columnist

One early summer evening in 1978 I was playing a pick-up soccer game on the Westtown School campus. Having just completed my freshman year at Earlham College, I participated in this weekly ritual to prepare for the upcoming soccer season with many of my teammates, who were graduates of the Quaker boarding school.

Among the players was a tall, distinguished-looking man who I took to be one of the teachers. But he competed with the aggressiveness of the other college-aged athletes on the field, refusing to give an inch.

After the game we shook hands and he introduced himself as "Earl Harrison." "You mean *the* Earl Harrison!" I exclaimed, surprised to learn that he was Westtown's headmaster.

"It depends who's asking," he said with a wry smile.

That was Earl Harrison - approachable, modest, and quick-witted. He was also a legendary figure in Quaker education.

Harrison, who died Monday at the age of 71, attended Westtown as a student before matriculating to Haverford College.

Masters degrees followed at Yale and Columbia. After a brief stint with the Council on Religious Education in Washington D.C. and a successful career as a teacher-coach at the William Penn Charter School in Philadelphia, Harrison, in 1968, became head of Westtown.

There he took an active role in nurturing students, teaching classes and coaching teams in addition to his considerable administrative responsibilities. He also recruited and mentored faculty with a caring guidance that touched many lives over the course of his tenure at the school. The fact that he was so approachable and saw no conflict between the Society of Friends' historic peace testimony and competitive athletics made him my kind of Quaker.

Although I was not a graduate of Westtown, Harrison took an interest in my plans to pursue a teaching career in Quaker education because of his deeply passionate commitment to the larger mission of Friends schools.

It didn't matter that he left Westtown to

become head of Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C., just a month after I met him in June 1978. He stayed in touch with those he left behind and often returned to contribute his work and wisdom to Quaker schools, both small and large, in the Philadelphia area. He also became an important role model in my life and a valued mentor for the remainder of his.

It was the Society of Friends' good fortune that Harrison headed two of the nation's - and Quakerism's - most prestigious schools at a time when they, like all private schools, were struggling with a number of challenges: how to promote social and economic diversity in schools that operate at a high tuition rate; how to attract dedicated, competent teachers without pricing Quaker education beyond the means of all but the affluent; and how to maintain Quaker values in schools where only a minority of students and teachers belong to the Religious Society of Friends.

I'm sure that Earl's popularity within the school community ebbed and flowed with the decisions he made. At the same time, those decisions were made with an approach that was collegial and respectful of the school's mission. That's not an easy task for someone who heads a school that educates the children of some of the most wealthy and influential families in the nation. But Earl succeeded where so many others failed.

His success was due, in part, to a firm adherence to his Quaker faith and, in part, to his understanding that there would always be a constant tension between the executive (i.e., alumni and trustee development, fund-raising) and pastoral (i.e., curricular, student and faculty concerns) responsibilities of a head.

That Earl Harrison lived his life in the comfort zone between those two roles is a remarkable achievement. That his Quaker example touched thousands of lives, many here in Chester County, is perhaps the most meaningful legacy of all.

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