

Obituary:

Wilhelm S. Wurzer

Philosophy professor, department chairman at Duquesne University

Jan. 11, 1948 - Feb. 20, 2009

Tuesday, February 24, 2009

By Gary Rotstein, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Wilhelm Wurzer, a philosophy professor at Duquesne University for more than 30 years who spent six years as chairman of its department, died Friday at Forbes Hospice in Oakland. He was 61.

Dr. Wurzer was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma four years ago. The Sewickley Heights resident battled through it, teaching graduate courses on Immanuel Kant and the philosophy of communication as recently as last month.

The blond-haired native of Austria was a vigorous man throughout his life, using outdoor physical pursuits such as skiing and hiking to balance out the scholarly world in which he excelled indoors.

Retaining just the faintest of accents, Dr. Wurzer was admired among colleagues for a sense of elegance in his wardrobe and appreciation of wine, music and other interests. Among students, he was popular not just for his knowledge but for the support he showed to the many he assisted in pursuit of their doctorates and other academic endeavors.

"He will be remembered as a professor who brought an air of sophistication to everything he did, and whose creative mind inspired and nurtured nearly a generation of Duquesne students," said James Swindal, who succeeded Dr. Wurzer as chairman of the department in 2005.

After receiving his Ph.D. from the University of Freiburg in Germany, Dr. Wurzer was drawn to a teaching position at Duquesne in 1975 as a rare American program that focused on continental philosophy, the area to which he was devoted. Most U.S. programs, such as the one across town at the University of Pittsburgh, were oriented to analytic, or Anglo-American, philosophy.

He was among the scholars on faculty who further added to Duquesne's recognition in the continental approach.

With Hugh J. Silverman, a friend and philosophy professor at Stony Brook University, Dr. Wurzer established the International Philosophical Seminar in 1990, which has drawn experts on continental philosophy to the Dolomite Mountains of Northern Italy nearly every summer since then. He was familiar with the Sudtiroi region from childhood, and he and Dr. Silverman would mix days of discussions of key 20th century philosophers' viewpoints with long, therapeutic hikes by the scholarly group into the mountains.

Dr. Wurzer was interested in the connection of philosophy to media, film, art and aesthetics. Among several books he authored, one from 1990 titled "Filming and Judgment" drew particular praise.

Just as impressive as his scholarship to many who knew him was his unwillingness to be stopped by cancer or to hide it. He made note of the disease to peers and students, but typically with good humor, and continued teaching two courses a semester even when the melanoma's effects left him unable to drive.

"He just wanted to keep going, and he kept going well beyond doctors' expectations," Dr. Swindal noted.

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth Santos; a daughter, Cristiana Wurzer, at home; and two sisters, Jolanda Mathrani of Potomac, Md., and Helga Subasinghe of Washington, D.C. A memorial service will be held at 5:30 p.m. Friday at the Duquesne University Chapel

Arrangements are by the Copeland Funeral Home in Sewickley.

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