

A Tragic Reminder That Great Universities Are Built by Great Faculty

The sudden death of a stellar professor leaves a lasting impact on a president, a campus and a scientific community. BY PHILIP L. DUBOIS

AS I CONSIDERED MY choice of topics for the last of my columns for *Trusteeship*, my mind wandered across many of my daily occupations—planning, budgets, legislative relations, fund-raising, and athletics.

But then events intervened. On December 30, I learned that one of the very best members of my faculty, Elizabeth Storm Williams, had been killed in a car crash on her way home from a Caribbean vacation. Beth's husband, Tom Thorne, also was killed.

At the campus memorial ceremony, I only began to appreciate what this loss meant. Their sudden deaths were, of course, profoundly felt by family members, friends, and colleagues. But the event was also a loss for the university as an institution, the entire state of Wyoming, and indeed, the community of science. So I chose to dedicate this last column to Beth and Tom and to reflect on just what it means when we say—as we often do—that great universities are built by great faculty.

Beth discovered and was the world's leading expert on chronic wasting disease, a type of brain-wasting disease in deer and elk similar to "mad cow" disease. She was an outstanding teacher and adviser, served regularly on research advisory panels and editorial boards, published dozens of refereed articles and book chapters, secured millions in research funding, and frequently provided faculty leadership for administrative searches and curricular reform.

Tom was a 35-year employee of the Wyoming Game and Fish Department,

serving at all levels of that organization. Along with Beth, he was an internationally renowned expert on brucellosis (a transmissible disease that causes pregnant cows to abort) and chronic wasting disease. He also was credited with having engineered the first successful captive breeding programs for the black-footed ferret and the Wyoming toad, actions that saved both species from extinction.

Tom and Beth shared their deep knowledge of animal diseases with anyone who cared to listen and did so in a way that was understandable to policymakers and the public. For their efforts, they shared the 1996 Distinguished Service Award of the Wildlife Disease Association.

Beth was a prime example of what it means when presidents speak to the importance of recruiting and retaining great faculty members for their institutions. It should come as no surprise that faculty members generally are very, very smart. What distinguishes the great faculty member is the dedication, discipline, and professionalism demonstrated in how that intelligence is applied.

As specialized as their intellectual interests might be, the best academics understand the robust interdisciplinary connections necessary to solve complex scientific and societal questions. Great faculty members care not just about their individual departments or programs but also about the institutions and the society

they serve. Great faculty members don't waste time or energy worrying about tenure; they quietly earn it. Great faculty members are far more than role models or advisers to junior faculty colleagues and students; they are mentors. Their passion for learning is contagious; their doors are always open. They rarely say No.

Great faculty members probably don't realize their impact on students. In eulogizing her professor, undergraduate pre-veterinary student Laura Linn said that Beth had helped her overcome an unspoken challenge—to become a woman respected in science. Beth had shown her that "being a woman in science is not only about being capable in your job but also having the composure and confidence that commands respect." Beth demonstrated for her that "reverence is born of who you are, not just what you have done."

Many faculty members probably don't realize the impact of a great colleague until that colleague is gone. Great faculty members make those who work with them better at what they do. Great faculty members motivate their colleagues to adopt higher standards, but they do so without preaching. Great faculty members lead by example and always have followers.

Beth's department chair, Donal O'Toole, reminded us at the service that her middle name was Storm. We need "disciplined, ethical, intelligent, caring storms in our lives," he said, "people who do things because it is right and honorable...who see land-grant universities as places of public service and deliver the goods with unrelenting intelligence and untiring effort."

Beth Williams was a perfect storm, and a great faculty member.

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