

Emile Joseph “Chip” Dion ’66 (Hon.); P’85, P’90, P’95

Instructor in Modern Languages, Emeritus (1934–2008)

By the time Chip [Dion] left the commencement stage from which he retired in 2007, he had long since become a fixture in the Modern Languages Department. Beginning in 1962, his commitment to the spoken language and to the development of direct cultural immersion had earned the respect and admiration of his colleagues and students, and had extended to those graduating seniors who surrounded the stage where he sat. In 1962, Chip had come as one of the young instructors hired to replace the original Harkness teachers who were moving at a brisk pace into retirement. As a youngster of 10, he drove through Exeter with his father, a Quebec native, who pointed out the halls of the Academy and commented on its unrivaled excellence. At that moment, Chip decided to become a part of it. This goal must have been reinforced when, during his own education at Pinkerton Academy, a teacher wrote: “I know he can command the respect of young people.”

Chip became accustomed to succeeding, not just in academic circles, but also in the Navy, where he served as an officer in the 1950s. One of his commanding officers wrote, “Dion’s tour of duty in this ship has been more successful than that of many other officers assigned under the same program. This success is attributed to his conscientiousness, [and] disciplined attitude toward his responsibilities.” In addition to his regular duties, Chip voluntarily organized classes in Spanish for his shipmates while they were based in Barcelona. This must have been the “Eureka!” moment for Chip—putting the spoken language together within its context.

When he entered the teaching ranks of the Academy after earning his B.A. at the University of New Hampshire, and his M.A. and M.Ed. from Harvard, language teaching was at the cusp of a revolution and he immediately took to the ramparts. Instead of relying on pages of translation, teachers were beginning to speak the language in class and expect the same from their students. Chip, with his fluency in both French and Spanish, was a natural. He later added German to his repertoire and taught sev-

eral courses in that language over his long career. He studied Mandarin before going to China in 1982 to investigate the possibility of starting the first Asian language program at Phillips Exeter Academy. And, in a past and perhaps more hopeful century,

he even studied Esperanto. Being a polyglot, he found vocabulary to be particularly fascinating: He would come into the department room and ask, with a twinkle in his eye, “How do you say *per-snickety* in Spanish or *currycomb* in French or *tit for tat* or *ripple effect*?” He knew the answer, of course, and he knew that no one else did, but it was a ritual that everyone enjoyed. He believed strongly in reading as a linguistic model and in thorough preparation. On most Saturday afternoons, Chip remained in his classroom for several hours carefully preparing grammatical, cultural and literary material for Monday’s classes. He would relish a moment of spontaneity in a class and could quicken the pace of a lesson with witticism, but always the focus and direction of a class grew out of his diligent preparation.

Travel was surely pleasure, but it was always professional development for Chip. He believed that teachers of foreign languages needed periodic reimmersion in order to keep their language skills intact. He developed the summer foreign study tours in order to give teachers, as

well as students, the chance to travel and keep current with the culture and language. He chose Mexico and Quebec for study centers, wanting the students to get to know countries in the New World. These tours in French and Spanish later became the basis for the language term-abroad programs when we moved to the trimester system. Always open for new experiences and the wider picture away from a Eurocentric focus, Chip fought hard for the introduction of Chinese into the curriculum with a Ford Grant in 1982, and again for Japanese, and later, Arabic.

Chip was in perpetual motion. His file at the Dean of Faculty’s Office is unique in being stuffed with postcards from all corners of the earth. He was in China observing schools. He was in France looking for exchange opportunities for PEA students. He



Chip Dion, who taught at Exeter for 46 years, developed PEA’s summer foreign language study tours and worked to add Chinese, Japanese and Arabic to the curriculum.

was in Cuernavaca, helping to establish a study program in Mexico. No one else had a file so much like a travelogue! Principal Steve Kurtz '44, '46, '78, '87 (Hon.); P'77 spoke directly to Chip's clearly focused energy when, in granting him a professorship, he said: "You are a man who gets things done. I was invited to China; you went. How did you manage that? How did you single-handedly arrange, finance and conduct one of our Bicentennial institutes for teachers? Where did you get the money? How have you managed to interest yourself in so many aspects of teaching, learning and pedagogy, and find the time and energy to follow up both by taking summer courses at Yale and Harvard, and by teaching courses at the University of New Hampshire? Your energy, your alertness, and your drive toward self-improvement are commendable and alarming. Are you going to spend your extra-Exeter life in China or in Mexico? Are you incorporated? Consider it."

When Chip began his teaching, he was very conscious of the traditions that he was carrying on and felt compelled to demand the utmost of his students. Early on, however, he added humor, understanding and empathy to seriousness of purpose—thanks to an alumnus who approached Chip at a school gathering in the early years and said, "You know, Mr. Dion, you were a very strict teacher, but I learned so much French from you!" Chip was elated. He asked the young man if he had continued with French in college. "Oh no, sir, no way," the alumnus had said. "That experience with you was enough!" It was an anecdote that Chip often shared when mentoring young colleagues with uncompromising standards.

His dogged determination won for the department a stage and projection room in the Little Theater, in the basement of Phillips Hall. Although it was destroyed by a recent flood, he would have liked the computer lab and experimental classroom that took its place. In recognition of his faithful and dedicated teaching, he won a Rupert Radford '56 Faculty Fellowship Award, a Brown Award, as well as the George S. Heyer Jr. '48 Award in recognition of the highest intellectual merit, devoted service and lengthy tenure. Chip was appointed the Percy C. Rogers Professor of Romance Languages and held that chair until his retirement. Even as modern language classes saw the introduction over the years of the language laboratory, 16mm film, the overhead projector, slides, VHS, and then the modern era of computer and DVD, he would always remind the department that the reading program was the bedrock of our teaching here.

Chip's commitments to the Academy and to his profession were broad and deep. Over the years, Chip served as director of the Summer School, department chair, and on more committees than probably any other teacher. And for many of these, he had volunteered—

not a common practice at Exeter. He once said to a colleague, "If the senior members of the faculty do not willingly serve on committees, how can we expect our younger members to understand the importance of committees to the sound operation of the Academy?"

Chip served 26 years in the dorm—a feat now impossible to emulate. He was dorm head of Peabody, Kirtland and Browning, where he raised his own family alongside the boys. A member of the class of 1968 said of his four years in Kirtland House, "My friends and I thought of Chip as one of the good guys. He cared about us, helped us whenever he could, and allowed me to leave Exeter with fond memories of him and his wonderful wife."

Throughout his years at Exeter, Chip was fortunate in having at his side Grace—his wife of more than 40 years. She shared his enthusiasm, his dedication and, as he often remarked, his success. Chip and Grace had three children: Emile III ("Skip") '85, Jennifer '90 and Christopher '95. Throughout their years in the dormitory, the Dion children were as well-integrated into the life of the dormitory as the boys in the dormitory were integral to the life of the family. Chip always took quiet pride in the knowledge that his three children had graduated from the institution that was so much a part of this definition of himself.

Outside the classroom, Chip had a wide range of interests that included cooking, stamp collecting, sailing and music. An accomplished pianist, he often played at department get-togethers, and would gather colleagues around him for some Spanish and French songs. He often joked that one of his dreams in life was to embark on a second career as a cocktail-lounge pianist. "Misty" and "Melancholy Baby" were already a part of his musical repertoire. No one who knew Chip could ever doubt that had he *really* wanted to be a lounge pianist, he'd have made it happen. For Chip, a *no* was a challenge—never a resolution.

Chip worked through the fall term of his 46th year at the Academy and retired at the age of 73. The first official act of his retirement was to continue his travels to unknown places. In January—barely a month after teaching his last class at Exeter—he, Grace and Chris were touring Santiago, Chile. After a full day of sight-seeing and a leisurely dinner, they were on their way back to the hotel when Chip collapsed, and all efforts to revive him failed. Sadly, there will be no more postcards for the file. ●

This Memorial Minute was written by Vicki Baggia P'91, P'92, P'03; Joseph Reiter P'91, P'96, P'98; James Samiljan P'85, P'90, co-chair, and Harvard Knowles '77, '78, '02 (Hon.), co-chair, and was presented at faculty meeting on March 4, 2009.