

## Rex Alexander McGuinn (1951–2002)

Rex was born in Hendersonville, NC, in 1951. He retained his loyalty to the state, receiving his B.A. from St. Andrews Presbyterian College and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Growing up in North Carolina and for a time in Alabama, he acquired his Southern courtesy, the twang in his speech and his passion for sports, especially basketball. His love of mountains came from hiking with his best friend, Toby, in the Blue Ridge Mountains around Tryon. And it was in North Carolina that he began to develop an appreciation for a lifelong circle of friends that he and Margaret were to share after their marriage in 1980, and through their lives together as teachers at the Moses Brown School in Providence, RI, and, beginning in 1987, at Phillips Exeter.

Rex's life at Exeter crossed usual boundaries and took him in seemingly different directions. Among the poems in *Landing in Minneapolis* is one called "Epigram":

*Had we a hundred lives to live,  
we could afford to be conventional  
In one of them.*

One look in Rex's classroom was enough to reveal his great devotions: the basketball on the bookcase, the Shakespearean movie poster, the autographed poem from Gary Snyder, two Western landscapes, the Yastrzemski collage and photographs of Bob Dylan and Virginia Woolf tacked up next to a poem by Li Po in Chinese calligraphy. Along the window ledge stood three little houses for contributions to Habitat for Humanity, a group he supported here as adviser and builder of a new house near Exeter. All around the room, on his desk, on bookshelves, on the walls were pictures of those who were dear to Rex: his lifelong friends from North Carolina, his family and, of course, countless pictures from the many trips that he and Margaret cherished. A *New Yorker* cartoon of a cat gazing at itself in a mirror, which he titled "Martha" after his and Margaret's gray-brown tabby, was captioned, "What immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?" Rex's infectious humor found him friends everywhere.

And even when the jokes were not that good, those friends would laugh, largely because of Rex's infectious grin when he told them. Rex quipped that the words said at his funeral would be his "Rexquiem." Jamie Simchik '02 remembered a first meeting in his English class, when Rex asked each student what he or she had done over the break. When it was his turn, Rex said, "My friend was hit by a dog." No one knew how to react. He continued, "It was a Greyhound." He joked that one day he might open a car repair shop and call it "Wrecks McGuinn."

His passion for learning found expression in his teaching, reflected in the Brown Family Teaching Award he received in 1998. Simon DeDeo '96 remembered "his book-lined classroom and how he would get excited and pull one out to pass around (or give away, as he did quite often)." John Kimble '98 wrote, "It all began seated at a Harkness table, my head tilted back nearly to my shoulder blades as I watched this enormously tall man . . . performing Shakespeare on the tabletop." Sarah Curtis '01 remembered reading Montaigne's essays and how profoundly she took his explanation of the word "essay" as "to try." He read Camus and Dante with his students, and always Faulkner and Eliot. Students from his classes ran to



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the modern languages department on the top floors of Phillips to find out the meaning of mysterious epigraphs in foreign tongues. An invitation to his house on Greenleaf Drive was a special treat for students to have ice cream and animal crackers together and watch a Shakespeare play on video. He would bring in photographs of the swans at Coole Park and then read Yeats aloud to his students. He shared his love for the poetic craft as adviser to the student publication *People Interested in Poetry*. He was head of the Lamont Poetry committees that brought Galway Kinnell, Derek Walcott and Allen Ginsberg to the Academy. An outstanding poet himself, he had several volumes of poetry to his credit as well as poems appearing in *Commonweal*, *Kansas Quarterly* and other magazines. His collection of poems, *Landing in Minneapolis*, is remarkable

for its multiplicity of tones, from the good ol' boy poems of Cooter Bakken to the high diction of "Ruined Choirs."

His interest in Shakespeare was marked by his National Endowment for the Humanities fellowship at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and his creation of the Shakespeare Conference at the Academy in June 2001. The conference fulfilled his hopes of attracting teachers with the common goal of making Shakespeare a vital part of the curriculum. In 2000, he and Margaret went to Stratford in England, where they saw performances of all three parts of *Henry VI*, thereby achieving a lifelong goal of seeing every Shakespearean play performed. His love for classical roots of English prompted him to bring together a group of colleagues to study Horace's odes and epistles. He received a second NEH fellowship to study at the Montaigne Institute at Whitman College in Washington. He soon found a way to incorporate Montaigne into his senior English classes—not the common fare. He was the moving force in bringing to the school the stunning exhibition of letterpress broadsides, *How the Ink Feels*, which the library ultimately presented as a memorial to him. Amidst the demands of school life, Rex maintained an intense interest in scholarship: he gave papers

on film and stage to the Shakespearean Association of America, the National Council of Teachers of English and the Blackfriars Conference. His articles appeared in *Shakespeare in the Classroom*, *Multicultural Literature of the United States* and in the Modern Language Association's *Approaches to Teaching* series. He was in the process of writing an essay linking the influences of Laurence Olivier's Shakespearean productions on Kenneth Branagh, an essay that was unfortunately never completed.

Rex loved sports as much as scholarship and started coaching J.V. boys basketball in 1987. He brought to coaching the same enthusiasm and caring that characterized the other facets of his life. Many colleagues wondered how Rex was ever able to cut a team down to 13 or 14 players from the 40 or 50 boys who tried out. In fact, he couldn't. He often kept a player who, even he admitted, "couldn't make a lay-up" but who had a work ethic and spirit he couldn't resist. Jay Marietta '97 recalled the rush of adrenaline he felt when he was chosen to replace a talented guard who had fouled out. Rex's quiet reassurance, "Just like practice, Jay," brought him the calm he needed. A former player wrote, "It was the arm he rested on my shoulder as we left the court for the locker room that I remember best." On the bus trips home, Rex would call a player or two up to sit beside him and talk with him about the game—"always instructive, always positive." He often played pickup basketball himself, and there was, of course, his dedication to running, which sent him out on a training run for the Cape Cod Marathon on that Saturday afternoon of September 28, when a fatal heart attack struck.

Soule Hall was the focus of Rex's dormitory experience, first as a resident and then as an affiliate. On duty nights he could be found settled into his comfortable easy chair, scratching comments on the papers piled up beside him. If Rex were lucky, a Tar Heel game would be on to provide background entertainment. If the boys wanted to talk, though, he would sit up, tilt his head to the side and peer above his glasses, ready to listen. And always, hand-in-hand with the attentiveness, came the jokes that he delighted in. That last Saturday morning, he came into the dorm and found a student alone watching television. "Have you heard about the new math channel? One of its shows has gotten great reviews, 'The X-Y Files.' And the new sitcom, 'Cosinefeld'?" Then he left, but only after yet another student found himself shaking his head with an amused and quizzical grin. A former student wrote of the care his younger brother received from both McGuinns "while he worked out his nightmarish adolescence. Without you both, he would have become too adrift to find himself." Another said, "I'll never forget how he would stop and talk to me every time he saw me on the paths." Austin Blackmon '03 wrote, "It wasn't until the memorial service for Coach in the library that I found my perfect memory of him. As the service drew to a close, I looked at his picture and I realized this smile followed each of his jokes. This smile greeted you each time you greeted him on the paths. This smile accompanied each Tar Heel basketball victory. This smile was even wider on the nights when he saw Ms. McGuinn coming into the gym, just before the end of practice, so he could take her out on a date."

As was obvious to everyone, Rex and Margaret were devoted to each other and enjoyed each other's company both at and outside the Academy. Throughout their marriage, travel was an important part of their lives, beginning with a honeymoon trip to the outer

banks of North Carolina. For their first dinner together after their wedding, Rex took Margaret to the Sonic Drive-In, a vision from the 1950s complete with waiters on roller skates and trays propped on the car doors. Both were in close connection with their own and each other's families, and they traveled frequently to North Carolina and Minnesota for family events. Together they cruised down the St. Croix River with Margaret's family just two weeks before he died. When their birthdays arrived, each would plan a weekend or an outing for the other, keeping the destination a secret until the trip was underway. On their last trip to England, they went to Abbey Road in St. Johns Wood, and took off their shoes to cross barefoot and write their names on the wall. Every year on their anniversary, Margaret would make a collage of the year in photographs of family and friends, theater programs and ticket stubs, train tickets, maps of their favorite hiking and mountain-climbing trips in New Hampshire, the Grand Canyon, in France, and other memorabilia of the year's high points. Rex and Margaret hosted frequent dinners and evening gatherings as a welcome for the year's Bennett Fellow or to include other newcomers or acquaintances with old friends, on the screened-in porch or around the massive stone fireplace of their Greenleaf Drive home.

Rex resisted one-dimensional descriptions, both of himself and of other people. He took pride in being 1/64th Cherokee, enough to put him on the tribal rolls. He enjoyed Margaret's homemade Italian biscotti, but he was always overjoyed to receive a package of "Moon Pies" from friends returning from the South. He played his acoustic guitar and sang the blues down at the Loaf and Ladle with a group of friends called the Amazing Prawns—a name drawn for no particular reason from a dish at a local Chinese restaurant. He and Margaret took up birding, and though they traveled far and wide on birding trips they loved their own backyard. A friend, summoned to see the barred owl in Rex and Margaret's yard one Thanksgiving morning, was convinced that Shakespearean trickery would greet her upon arrival, a suspicion that disappeared only when he handed her the binoculars and the magnificent bird came into focus. Rex was always interested in a point of connection to people, some kind of bridge. He would often drop off in the mailbox of a friend a description of a wonderful little hotel or a great restaurant that he and Margaret had found on one of their many trips out West, to Alaska, to the South, to South Africa or Europe. Or he would share an article clipped from *The New Yorker* about a promising poet or a copy of a biography of Jackie Robinson or a web posting from the New Hampshire Audubon Society. An avid theatergoer, Rex organized season tickets for groups of friends to the American Repertory Theater and the Huntington Theater in Boston.

Rex loved, most of all, the present moment, captured in a poem, in the smile of a friend, in his love of mountains and people and Margaret. This is how we remember him. This is his Rexquiem.

—Vikki Baggia  
Kathy Brownback  
Susan Keeble  
Ron Kim  
Charlie Terry  
Malcolm Wesselink

*Editor's Note: This Memorial Minute was delivered at the November 12, 2003 faculty meeting.*