G. Alec “Doc” Stewart: Our friend, colleague, mentor, surrogate father, kind voice, prankster, wise man, jokemeister, sage physicist, human-potential cultivator, and arguably most compassionate person many of us will ever meet.

—quoted from an email that Chris Chirdon, a systems analyst in the University Honors College, distributed to students to announce Stewart’s death

Alexander the Great

A freshman has questions about her physics homework. So she takes an elevator to the 36th floor of the Cathedral of Learning to find her professor’s office. His door is open when she arrives. He welcomes her into his acropolis of books and patiently responds to her questions. They eventually unravel the physics conundrum that was torquing her brain.

Having solved the problem, she prepares to leave. But the professor asks her what else she’s passionate about. What piques her curiosity besides vectors and laws of gravity?

The student, Lauren Cashman, blurts out what pops into her head: Greek mythology and Greek history. The next thing she knows, they’re talking about Alexander the Great, and she’s holding a biography of Alexander. Cashman feels bewildered; her physics professor has just given her a history book about an ancient Greek king.

“On the surface, Greek mythology has nothing to do with physics, but that didn’t matter,” she later recalled. “I think Doc wanted me to become diversified.”

Glenn Alexander “Doc” Stewart, the founding dean of the University Honors College and a lifelong scholar who imbued thousands of Pitt students with the courage to learn more than they ever thought possible, died April 7, 2010. He was 69.

Cashman’s visit to Stewart’s office in 2005 was typical of his interactions with students since he became a physics professor at Pitt in 1972, and later director of Pitt’s first honors program in 1977. He was legendary for his ability to select books that would profoundly affect students. He never actually assigned the books. He didn’t, for example, expect Cashman to send him an essay about Alexander the Great. (Though if she had, he would have read it earnestly.) He simply expected that she learn as much as she could about what interested her in the world.

Stewart’s conviction that students should push beyond their intellectual boundaries is a philosophy that has shaped Pitt’s honors program, which became the University Honors College in 1987. He dubbed his philosophy “Life Above the Neck.”

Pitt students living life above the neck during Stewart’s leadership have won national and international prestige, including six Rhodes Scholarships, nine Marshall Scholarships, 42 Goldwater Scholarships, 11 Truman Scholarships, and five Udall Scholarships, as well as Churchill and Gates Cambridge scholarships. Many have participated in the Brackenridge Undergraduate Fellowship summer program, which Stewart founded to give undergraduate students opportunities for in-depth research. Cashman, for instance, spent a summer as a Brackenridge Fellow researching the probability of asteroids hitting the earth.

Students also accompanied Stewart on intellectual trips to farflung places like Mongolia. In 2006, Wyoming rancher Allen Cook was moved by Stewart’s persuasive initiative and vision and gave to the University Honors College 4,700 acres of land in eastern Wyoming containing rich dinosaur fossil beds as a preserve for education, conservation, and research in geology, archaeology, and the life sciences.

Stewart’s love of learning and respect for others created an environment that enriched all. University Honors College courses are not restricted to honors students; they are open to all undergraduates at Pitt. His “Life Above the Neck” philosophy was never elitist; it welcomed those who embraced the joys of curiosity and discovery, forever symbolized in the form of books that he gifted to students through the years.

Cashman (A&S ’09), now an astronomy PhD student at Boston University, keeps the book about Alexander the Great on her shelf, inspiring her to be an explorer of ideas, always.

Other alumni, too, fondly keep Stewart’s books on their nightstands. Recently, Pitt students established the G. Alec Stewart Memorial Book and Resource Fund in tribute to this inspiring teacher, master explorer, and extraordinary man.

—Cara J. Hayden

Stewart’s sense of humor endeared him to the multitude of 18-to 22-year-old students he inspired over the years. He often demonstrated physics principles with bike tires, once getting his necktie tangled up in the spokes. When Pittsburgh Post-Gazette artist Rob Rogers drew this affectionate comic, no one laughed louder than Stewart.

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