

Fred Chappell tribute

Saturday's front-page article on Fred Chappell was well-placed, and included fine quotations from some who knew him well. But, it would take many more pages to adequately describe Fred Chappell's impact on literary life in his home state and the UCG campus, as well as on countless admiring students, friends and fellow faculty members.

An anecdote illustrating some of Mr. Chappell's many gifts as poet, educator, kind soul: Asked to read poems to junior high school class, our courtly state Poet Laureate read in his resonant voice poems that pleased and challenged twelve-year olds. In discussion afterwards, he answered their often naive questions with typical honesty, wry humor and modesty. The seventh graders had not expected to be enchanted. It was obvious. They were.

Another story that displayed Fred's generosity of spirit and love of his art: New in town, and just finding my way in many respects, I was permitted to sit in on a class given by UNCG's fabled professor. After class, graduate student Stan Jenkins and I offered thanks and praise to Mr. Chappell for his erudition, so adroitly shared. He replied, "Why don't you folks come to my house on Saturday morning so we can give these poems the attention they deserve?" We were astonished, but gratefully accepted.

The eagerly-awaited day arrived, cold and snowy; as Stan and I trudged up the steps to the Chappell's home, the fragrance of home-made muffins greeted us even before Susan Chappell opened the door. Muffins were baked, we learned (again astonished), by our host. We then sat in a circle--no central position to designate the expert--with our muffins and excellent coffee, and had a discussion for the ages. An unforgettable morning.

This, I was to learn, was the way Fred and Susan Chappell treated eager students throughout their many years on campus. Added to such hospitality and teaching of exceptional quality were the endless hours Fred spent reading and critiquing the manuscripts of writers whose most fervent dreams were to earn praise from their renowned master. This eager student also benefited from Fred's unique brand of courteous but firm critiques of fledgling work.

I haven't even begun to describe the effort Fred put into his role as Poet Laureate, the many poems he wrote for celebrations in small towns, the appearances made....

I imagine others will write with more eloquence and experience about the effects on their own lives of this remarkable man. I join them in heartfelt gratitude for Fred Chappell's radiant, yet unfailingly humble presence among us these many years.

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